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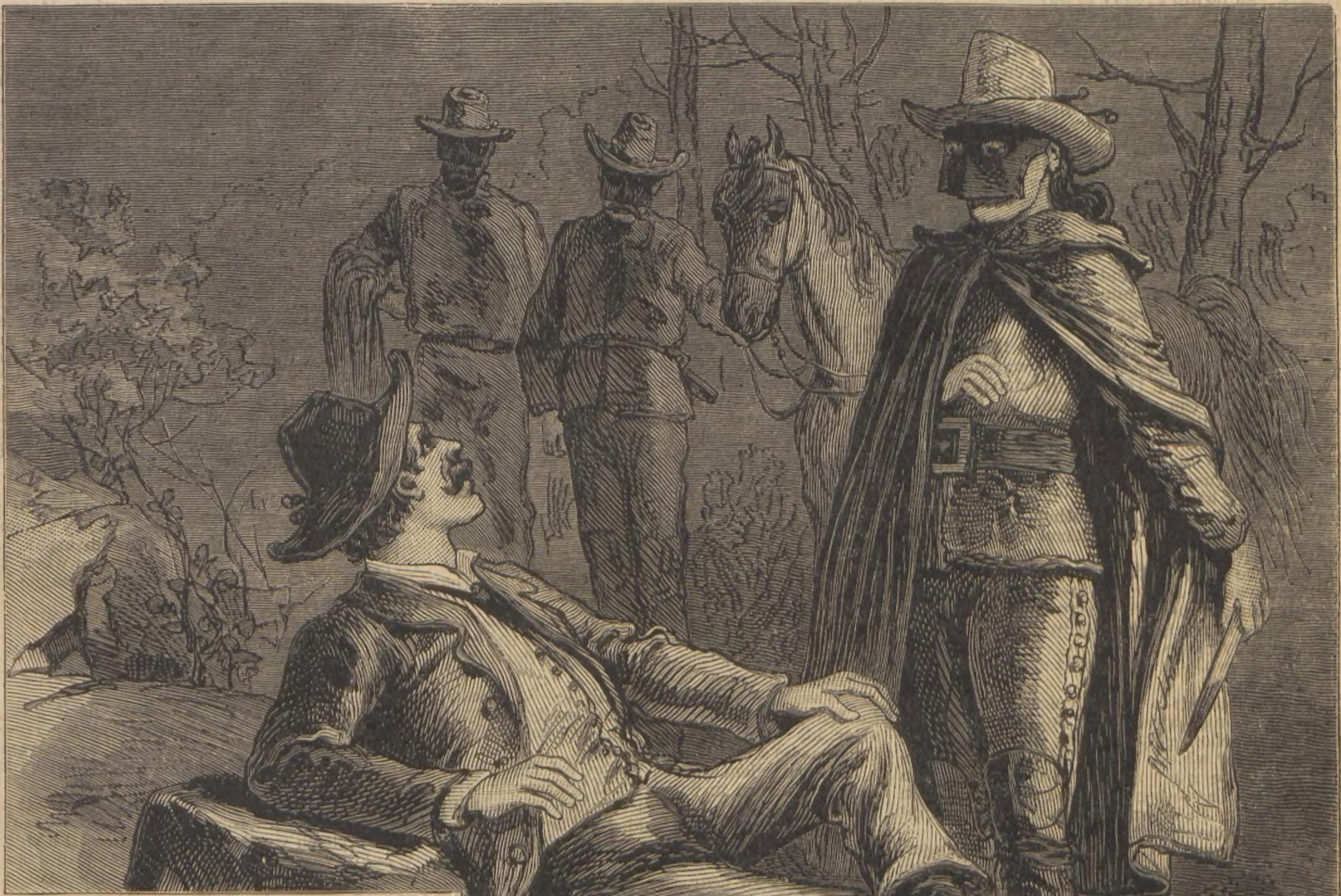
Vol. XXXVIII.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., February 29, 1888.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5 00 a Year.

No. 488



OR,

The Big Bracer's Bequest.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "MONTE JIM," "NOR'-
WEST NICK," "A ROYAL FLUSH,"
"PISTOL JOHNNY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A VOICE FROM THE DEAD.

"THERE'S such a thing as being too mighty lucky!"

"An' when it comes to sortin' out the papers, Big Gypsy's got a heap sight more fingers than them he uses fer to scratch with!"

"Give him another month, and you might as well change Silver Lode to Big Bracerville!"

"An' right thar ye've got it in a single chaw, gents!" with an emphatic swing of his old felt-hat that caused the lights to flicker within the lamps overhead. "What's it been but a big brace game fer all hafe-way honest critters ever sense Gypsy Gale struck the locate? Show me the man in camp that ever got more'n a single weenty taste o' winnin', jest enough fer to draw

THE SPORT
THOROUGHBRED

"THOROUGHBRED SPORT BY TRAINING. OBJECT, FUN, GLORY AND PROFIT COMBINED. SELAH!"

him on an' on ontel the black-mugged card-sharp stripped him cleaner than he was born naked! Show me that, an' I'll show you a reason why we'd ort to let the Big Bracer hev full swing as he's made sure of this fur! Show me the man, I ax ye!"

Judd Varley shifted his gaze from face to face as these hot sentences broke forth from as many different quarters. There was a slight frown upon his strongly handsome face, and a troubled look in his deep gray eyes. One white, long-fingered hand mechanically plucked at his drooping blonde mustache and he seemed wholly at a loss what words to utter: something extraordinary, the men of Silver Lode would have told you, for, as a rule, the tongue of the tall gambler was fluent enough.

Possibly it was because these denunciations, fierce, surly, bitter, jeering, of which only a small sample is given here, were directed toward one of the same craft as himself. Possibly he was restrained by the thought that, in the growing storm, it might prove unhealthy as unwise to call too close attention to himself.

But if Judd Varley was temporarily tongue-tied, one other within sound of those ugly, menacing voices was not. And more than one of the excited group turned toward the bar with a startled look as Fatty Wells dropped his favorite shot-gun across the counter with a grimly significant rattle-te-bang!

"Business is business, an' empty talk is durn foolishness, gents. I ain't begrudgin' the room ye take up, nur the wind ye're chawin' to waste, but I'm preachin' this gospel: Ef a man cain't stand a loss, he's no business to fool with the papers. Ef he ain't ready to pay back when he wins, he hain't no right fer to kick an' squeal 'cause t'other 'jects to his drawin' stakes when he loses. An' it's a mighty low-down gang that'll git together in a heap to cuss a gent, gambler or no gambler, Big Bracer or not, when that same gent ain't nigh enough fer to talk back fer his own side!"

With his fat cheeks swelling until they nearly obliterated his tiny pug nose and eclipsed his little blue eyes, the sturdy owner of "The Alhambra," crack saloon and most important gaming place in Silver Lode, gaspingly caught his breath for a fresh start as he defiantly glanced over the group of stern, armed men before the bar. But his hands were steady enough, his thumb on the hammers at half-cock, his fingers within the trigger-guard, ready for instant work.

And not one of those present but knew Fatty Wells would shoot at an instant's warning.

"How about old Undermill?" sharply interjected one of the men in front of the bar. "What show did he have for winning, when he was too drunk to tell an ace from a ten-spot?"

"That's the blackest mark I've heard of, for a fact," frowned Judd Varley, with an impatient tug at his mustache. "I'm the last man in the world to abuse another for winning, when all's equal; but if Undermill was as drunk as they say, why—"

"As who says?" puffed Fatty Wells.

There was no reply, for just at that juncture a man plunged through the front door, pale and breathless, fairly staggering up against the bar as he huskily gasped:

"Gi'me—whisky! Wash that sight—out o' my mouth—ugh!"

In a breath half a dozen voices were eagerly demanding an explanation, but not until the shivering fellow gulped down the full glass of strong liquor which Fatty Wells promptly supplied, did he utter another word. Nor even then until the shot-gun rattled significantly on the counter, fu'lly explaining the gentle hint which accompanied it:

"If it's 'nother o' your leetle games, Ginger, fer a free wet, I've got a patent stomach-pump right hyar—see?"

But Ginger Gore seemed too badly frightened even to scare at the twin tubes which were gently thrust under his red nose, which formed such a sharp contrast to his ashen cheeks, though he manged to gasp:

"Wuss then snakes—ugh!" as his teeth clicked together like castanets. "I never thought—an' I runnin' right in onto him! An' me thinkin' him takin' a snooze—with the head o' him layin' onto his two arms—an' them on the table whar—I'll never be able fer to grub off o' it no more ugh!"

With a dark frown that made his handsome face look cold and hard and grim, Judd Varley gripped the frightened wretch by an arm, shaking him violently, forcing his bloodless face to turn up to those gleaming, steel-like eyes.

"Out with it, you idiot! What's turned up? What did you see?"

"Pard's toes—that's what!" blurted out Ginger Gore. "Turned up—they hev! Dead—an' he wasn't cold yit when I putt the hand o' me on his head fer to wake him with a skeer! See—it's his!"

Though none had noticed the fact, until now the fellow had kept his right hand hidden among the folds of his garments. As he spoke he thrust the member out into the full flood of light showing the dull red stains which marked the fingers—a stain such as fresh blood alone can make.

Judd Varley started back, his own hand drop-

ping away, despite his usually strong nerves. A curious expression came into his eyes, and he involuntarily glanced toward Fatty Wells, whose plump cheeks were paling visibly, and whose celebrated "peacemaker" was gently sliding back from the polished counter. In his little eyes could be read much the same suspicion which showed in the gray orbs of the tall gambler.

"Not the old man? Not Todd Undermill?" ventured one of the group.

Ginger Gore nodded abruptly as he cast an unsteady glance toward his blood-marked right hand.

"Wuss luck—but it's dead sure, gents! An' thar lays his ole right han'—the same fist I've gripped as a pard so plenty times, gents! An' the gun gripped in it yit—with a hole through—ugh!"

"Killed him own self! Then it hain't murder!" panted Fatty Wells, with an unconscious sigh of relief.

Ginger Gore turned upon the speaker with a vicious energy, his bleared eyes all aglow, his yellow teeth showing in a savage snarl:

"It is murder—*bloody murder!* Who robbed the poor critter of all he had in the world? An' him talkin' on'y a bit ago o' pullin' up and lightin' out fer home an' the ole wife an' the kids, to live the rest o' his days in peace an' comfort! An' the devil—I say ag'in that it's *wuss* then murder! I say that Gypsy Gale is 'countable fer the hull o' it—that he murdered my pard jest as shorely as ef he hed gripped the gun that blotted his pore brains out!"

Never before had any one present seen the slip-shod, easy-going Ginger Gore so terribly excited, so intensely in earnest, as while pouring forth these words. And his fitful shivering, his manner of holding his blood-marked hand half-behind him, half-extended from his side, lent double emphasis to his speech.

Even Fatty Wells had not a word to say in defense of the man thus savagely charged with murder. While from the stern, frowning group before the bar, came low but deep and emphatic mutterings of vengeance.

Judd Varley stood irresolute, tugging at his mustaches after his fashion when not wholly decided what course to pursue. From the blanched, quivering face of Ginger Gore, his gaze roved over the countenances of the others present, his countenance growing just a shade paler as he found all eyes directed toward him, as men look toward an acknowledged leader. But his flinching was only momentary. With an evident effort he recovered himself, and accepted the mute nomination.

"We've got to look into it, gentlemen, of course," he said, his tones clear and steady. "But don't jump at a conclusion which may deeply wrong an entirely innocent man. Wait until we have investigated everything. Then—if Gypsy Gale is plainly proven the prime cause—"

"I speak fer the first grip on the rope that sends him to Tophet!" harshly cried Ginger Gore, his blood-marked right hand gripping at the air as though his fingers already felt the avenging halter.

"You shut!" frowned Varley, with a flashing glance, as he moved toward the door at the head of the company. "See that suspicion don't drop at your own door!"

"Wasn't he my pard? Wasn't he—" muttered the fellow, brokenly, as he unsteadily followed after, his voice dying away in something like a groan as he crossed the threshold.

In stern silence, Judd Varley led the way to the little cabin in which Todd Undermill, with Ginger Gore, had lived since before he made his "lucky strike" which added "The Capsheaf" to the list of paying mines and claims in the Silver Lode district.

As they drew near, the dim light of a single candle showed through the dust-coated window to the right of the door. And on tip-toe, as though he dreaded disturbing the dead, Judd Varley approached the faint beacon, peering in through grime and cobwebs to see—

What Ginger Gore had so shiveringly hinted at rather than described: a human form bowed upon a rude table, its iron-gray hair showing shaggy and matted in the faint candle-light. And just the silver-sighted tip of a revolver visible past the bowed head.

"Don't crowd. Keep back from the table. If it is really murder, there may be signs lying about," muttered Varley, as he left the window and pushed open the unlatched door to enter into the presence of grim death.

Scarcely had he crossed the threshold when a low ejaculation crossed his lips. His keen eyes caught sight of a folded paper lying on the table, one corner of which was reddened by the life-blood that had collected in a hideous pool before the corpse.

He opened the paper, bending near the dim light to read. Then his voice broke the breathless silence which had fallen over all:

"It's a suicide, plain enough! But—judge for yourselves."

He cleared his throat, then read as follows:

"OLD PARD:—

"You'll understand better than the rest of Silver Lode why I've done this deed, but to make sure

everybody knows why I've chosen to blow out my brains, I write this.

"Back home I left a good old wife and four children. I could see only the poor-house for us all, should ill-health overtake me, and so—well, I came out here to die or make a living for the future. And—it is die!"

"As Heaven hears my words, Gypsy Gale got me drunk—drugged my liquor, I can almost take oath—and then robbed me of my all! I'm too old to make another stake. I can't go home to my family empty-handed. And so—this is my last resource.

"May the never-dying curse of the widowed and the fatherless follow Gypsy Gale to his grave!"

"TODD UNDERMILL."

CHAPTER II. BROUGHT TO BAY.

COLD and hard sounded the tones of the tall gambler as he read these lines, so few, yet so full of utter despair.

Without a word of comment he refolded the bit of paper, letting it drop from his fingers, to settle on the pool of coagulated blood.

He made no move toward assuring himself that life was indeed extinct, for that was unnecessary. All present knew as much. No mortal could live with such a ghastly hole through his skull.

But he did touch the heavy revolver about whose butt the fingers of the dead man were still closed; were stiffened as though frozen fast to the instrument of death! For as Judd Varley lifted the weapon by its barrel, to gaze into the blackened muzzle, the hand of the corpse moved and came clear from the table on which it had rested.

With a little shiver the tall gambler lowered the weapon to its original position, stepping back a pace as he said, glancing slowly from face to face of the witnesses:

"It is a case of suicide, by the poor fellow's own confession, but—I'd rather be poor Undermill than Gypsy Gale this night!"

"It's a durned lie!" hoarsely snarled Ginger Gore, his face all aflame, his eyes glowing redly as he strode forward and rested his blood-marked hand on the bowed head of the dead man. "It ain't no suicide! It's murder—*bloody murder!* An' Gypsy Gale killed him—killed him jest as surely as ef his own han' hed held the gun—his own fingers crooked on the trigger! An' ef they's a man in the hull town that's anythin' like a man, I call on him—stan'in' hyar with my paw wet in the blood o' my ole pard! with them words o' his widder an' his starvin' kids ringin' into the two ears o' me! I call on that man to jine in with me when I sw'ar I'll hunt the red-handed murderer down to death fer this deed! Ef they ain't no sech man in Silver Lode, then I'll do the job on my own hook, an' add my cuss to that writ' by pore Todd—only my cuss'l be on Silver Lode an' the hull kit-an'-b'ilin' o' measly shoats that make up its poppylation—so thor!"

"Leave out the cuss part, Ginger," coldly responded one of the company. "They's men in Silver Lode, an' white clean through! Ax Gypsy Gale ef he don't think so, when he's swingin' at the best eend o' a tight rope!"

"That's what!"

"Fetch him here to look on his last job!"

"Let this murder be his Cap-sheaf!"

"Scatter the news and let every citizen have a shake at it. Don't let's be selfish, mates!" with a harsh, metallic laugh.

Judd Varley stood irresolute, as it seemed, his broad, white brow wrinkled by a perplexed frown. Even yet he seemed to be desirous of throwing oil on the troubled waters, for he suddenly cried out:

"Go slow a bit, gents! After all, what evidence is there against the Big Bracer? Only these written words, and they those of a suicide. Would a sane man kill himself? Can his wild accusations be credited without discount? Can you lynch a man—"

"Yes, an' two of 'em, fer that matter!" flashed Ginger Gore, boldly confronting the tall gambler. "Don't you chip in too deep, Mr. Varley, or mebbe you'll wish you'd stayed out o' the game! We've got nothin' ag'inst you, so fur. You're a card-sharp, but you skin a man fair. You win an' we lose, but we don't kick at a honest, squar' game. Your own readin' said that Gypsy Gale robbed my pard by druggin' him! An' when he got back his senses ag'in, the thought o' his kin back home driv' him plum' crazy an' he pulled his gun. But Big Bracer hed a finger on the trigger! Not even you dar' say I ain't right in this!"

There was a low, ominous growling sound among those present, and a shade of pallor crept into the handsome face of the card-sharp. Bold though he undoubtedly was, he no longer persisted.

After all, what was it to him? He had no particular cause for loving Gypsy Gale. There was no good reason why he should invite the noose by a vain and useless effort to save the Big Bracer from a rope.

Even Ginger Gore seemed to forget the corpse lying with shattered skull over the table. The mad longing for revenge had seized upon him, as well as all the rest, to judge from their words and actions.

They rushed out of the cabin, handling their

revolvers nervously. A few of them sped away in different directions through the town, intent on spreading the news so that others might join in the lynching. And, it may be, in order to strengthen their cause, for Gypsy Gale was hardly a man to tamely submit to lynch-law, unless taken wholly by surprise.

Some such reflection apparently swept across the mind of the tall gambler, for he strode to the front and touched Ginger Gore on the arm.

"Don't show your teeth at me, Gore," he said, quietly, as the rough fellow turned swiftly upon him. "I'm only giving a word for your own good. If you're dead bent on lynching Gypsy Gale—"

"Ain't thar cause a-plenty lyin' back in thar?" with a vicious flash of his bloodshot eyes toward the dimly visible cabin under the trees.

"Don't ask me, for I'm not judging the case," was the cold retort. "It's bad enough at the best, and I don't want it made any worse than can be helped. But if you go yelping and snarling after this fashion, how long will it take Gale to get his battery ready to open on *you*? He's only one man, you say. Granted. But he's a mighty bad man to crowd into a corner, don't you think?"

"Ain't thar a-plenty o' us to do the crowdin'?"

"There'll be less before the crowding is complete," with a short, hard laugh. "I'd save the fellow, for a fair and full trial in due course, if I could. But, as that can't be—"

"You're mighty right—it cain't!"

"Then I'll do all I can to spare more valuable lives. Quiet down until you've got him surrounded, then sail in if he won't surrender in peace. If not—if you give him a show to use his teeth—he'll eat his bigness through the whole gang! And you'd know as much, too, if you wasn't boiling over!"

"That's clean talk, every time!" nodded one of the company in grim approval. "What if the critter makes a break to the hills? Who's to sartify that we'll git him at all?"

"Just what I'm trying to beat through your thick skulls," with a repetition of that metallic laugh. "Better one man hung than a half-dozen shot down first!"

Even Ginger Gore seemed favorably impressed by this reasoning, and from that time on their progress was in comparative silence. Yet not such as the tall card-sharp advised, thanks to the numerous recruits which were now rapidly flocking in to swell the ranks of the avengers. They were rather too noisy for secret movements, until warned by some member of the original company.

Of them all, not one voice was lifted in defense of Gypsy Gale. Not one among them all but seemed more than willing to take a hand in hanging the man who had received the significant title of "Big Bracer."

It seemed generally understood that Gypsy Gale was not to be sought for in the town proper, nor in any of the saloons or gaming establishments which he usually habited. For several days past the big gambler had held himself aloof from all such places; ever since the night on which he won at cards the Cap-sheaf Mine from Todd Undermill.

This in itself had stirred up public sentiment against him. As many shrewdly reasoned, why should he hide himself if he was guilty of no crime, of nothing underhanded?

And so the party of man-hunters were forced to pass entirely through the town before they could expect to find the man against whom they had vowed bitter retribution.

At every yard of progress almost, one or more recruits were added to their ranks, until when nearing the solitary building which Gypsy Gale lived in, more than one-half of Silver Lode was present.

Judd Varley went with the company, though having said his say, he kept well in the rear, seeming ashamed of the mission.

Yet his advice was not forgotten, and as their objective point was neared, the party divided with the intention of surrounding the house before their coming could be detected and the alarm taken.

There were no lights visible through the windows, though the hour was still very early, and Gypsy Gale, like the rest of his profession, was known as a thorough night-hawk. But not once was there a thought given to his having taken to flight.

Why should he, since nearly all of his wealth lay locked up in mines, developed or still only promising prospects? Surely he would not abandon all that he had won by nearly two years of almost unbroken luck at cards!

Ginger Gore thumped on the closed door with the butt of his pistol, sharply summoning Gypsy Gale to open up. No response came from within, and as only the dull echoes answered back the call, for the first time thoughts of possible flight from the wrath to come were born.

"Set the shack afire!" yelled one of the mob, viciously. "Roast the hungry rat out o' his hole!"

"Look out for the rat's teeth while trying to scorch his hide, gentlemen!" came a deep, stern voice through the night.

Not from inside the house, but from an entire

ly unexpected quarter, and as all eyes instinctively turned toward the little, tumble-down hut which served the purpose of a stable, they caught a dim and indistinct glimpse of a man on horseback, facing them, under the dense shade of the leafy trees overhanging the rude structure.

"Thar he is!"

"With six deaths in each hand, you want to bear in mind, gentlemen!" sharply came the clear voice. "No crowding, unless you're spooling for a free funeral. Now—why burn my house?"

Only one man against nearly four-score, but that man armed to the teeth, cool, nervy, used to facing odds, carrying his life in his hands. And while they were fairly exposed to the rays of the nearly full moon, he was hardly visible through the shadows cast by the trees, with a background of rocks and the dark hill.

"Tain't the house we're wantin' most, cuss ye!" snarled Ginger Gore, furtively shifting his pistol until his thumb touched the hammer. "It's *you* we want most, Gypsy Gale."

"May I ask for what use?" with a half-sneer which, in the face of such tremendous odds, alone proved the gambler an extraordinarily fearless being.

"Fu'st, to take you back to look at your last dirty job, durn ye!" flashed Ginger, cocking his revolver under cover of his own voice. "To take you to whar my ole pard lays with the top o' his head blowed off, an' a letter sayin' it was 'long o' your druggin' an' guggin' him out o' all his property."

"If you mean winning the Cap-sheaf, you lie, Ginger Gore! And, not only you, but all the gang you've brought forward to back you up!"

"Better go slow, Mr. Gale," came the cold, clear tones of Varley, as he pushed his way through the uneasy crowd.

"I was looking for *you*, you bloodhound!" came viciously from the lips of the shadowy horseman, and a movement on his part led to the crowd's bracing themselves to resist a dash.

Ginger Gore took prompt advantage of this and sent a couple of shots toward his sworn victim. And then, the ice once broken, all thoughts of talk were cast to the winds.

In swift answer to the first shots, Gypsy Gale opened fire even as he set his good horse in motion, wheeling to flee for dear life. His first bullet caused Judd Varley to reel and stagger back, and drew a fiercely-mocking laugh from the fugitive as he cried:

"You'll never live to carry out your foul—"

The remainder was lost to hearing in the rattling fusilade which for a few moments caused the rugged hills to re-echo, and fairly outshone the clear moonlight with the ruddy glare of burning powder.

And as they fired, the avengers sprung forward, each man eager to be among the first to lay hands on the big gambler. It was a mad, blind rush, for, after those first few shots, no sounds came to guide them save the crash of heavy hoofs until—with bloodthirsty yells they leaped to where a struggling, crippled mass lay in the shadows.

CHAPTER III.

A THOROUGHBRED SPORT.

"HANDS up, and empty, stranger!"

Clear, cold and cutting came the challenge through the night, and closely following was a significant rattle of firearms under cover to either hand of the single horseman, muzzles tinkling against rocks.

"Halt she am, gents!" was the instantaneous response, as a sharp tug threw the good horse back on its haunches. "And hands up, too, if you'll just start a hitching-post out in front of my fiery, untamed Rosinante, as a horsey hint against making a bolt— Ah, thanks!"

Several phantom-like figures left the cover for the stage-trail in front of the traveler, the more surely to check any attempt at escape by a sudden dash, and with a sigh of relief his hands dropped the reins and raised above his head, ostentatiously empty and unarmed.

"Don't blame me, gentlemen, if you're making a water-haul," he blandly added, sweeping his eyes about as though curious as to his surroundings. "If I'm labeled United States mail, or Express, or gold escort, I don't know it. If I'm what you're looking for, why—"

"You're what we've got, and be sure we'll know how to make the best of a bad bargain," curtly interposed the hidden challenger. "All eyes open, boys! His tongue's too glib not to cover some deviltry. If he tries to play roots, down him—for keeps!"

The phantom-like figures in front condensed into substantial men, armed and masked or cowled in regular road-agent style, as they drew nearer the prick-eared animal, then firmly gripping the bridle, clearly in readiness to deal with either horse or rider, or both in case of need.

But the horseman seemed little inclined to give them trouble. His empty hands, showing white as they were lifted into a rift of moonshine above his head, showed no itching for a weapon, and though there was still that peculiar touch of mockery in it, his voice rung out graver than at first:

"She's running all your way, gents, and I

haven't even a say-so. I might bluff one, or even two, Royal Bengals, but when you come at me with the whole menagerie— Well, play I'm froze out, won't you?"

From near the point whence came the voice of the challenger now sounded quick but muffled tones, as though a superior was giving his orders, and the first speaker curtly uttered:

"Keep your dukes elevated, will you? Strip him, lads! There's claws under the velvet, or I'm no judge of rats!"

From each side of the trail slipped a dark figure, and deft hands searched the horseman for weapons, not only removing the belt from about his waist, but feeling in every pocket and over his entire person.

Unresistingly he submitted to all this, heaving a sign as the two masked searchers fell back to their former cover.

"Poor rat! Fur singed, ears cropped, teeth filed down and caudal appendage shamefully abbreviated! Oh, for a hole in which to hide my sorely diminished head!"

In melancholy tones the stranger thus bemoaned his misfortunes, and an involuntary chuckle came floating out through the shadows. It was not often the road-agents "held up" a customer of this caliber.

"Don't worry about the hole, stranger," curtly uttered the seeming chief of the night-riders, stepping into partial view. "The hole may be ready before you are ready for it."

"I dare say the hole can wait," with a short laugh, adding briskly, as he half-turned in the saddle to face the road-agent: "Did I hear you order me to drop my dukes, dear sir? I can stand it a little longer if I have to, but, really, I'm not hankering arter it."

From behind the road-agent came a low, brief whistle, and as though the sound contained an order, the masked man sharply uttered:

"Business is business, and fooling's played out! Light, but play you're stepping on eggs."

Without a word the horseman obeyed, just giving his good steed a brief touch of regret as he turned to follow his somber guide. Though that was the only sign, he felt as if taking leave of his last friend.

Through the bushes which lined the stage-trail at this point the traveler and his guide made their way, seemingly in pursuit of a faint, rustling sound which kept just so far in advance, until they reached a patch of open, moonlighted ground, across which the prisoner caught a glimpse of a cloaked figure gliding, to turn and stand at ease when just within the line of shadow cast by a bushy-topped tree.

The guide stopped short with his charge as the cloaked figure lifted a gloved hand. Then sternly came the words:

"Who are you, and whither bound, stranger?"

"A man, half-white and free-born," was the prompt response, but his shoulders shrugged slightly as he added: "You tell the rest, please, for I never even shuffled to your deal."

"Good, but not good enough," curtly commented the other, an impatient gesture casting back the dark cloak until one side of a trim, lithe figure was open to view. "Where were you bound when we stepped in your path?"

"To Silver Lode, your Majesty," with a bow profound in its mockery. "How long do you reckon it'll take me to get there?"

"That depends."

The chief stepped back into the shadows, at the same time making a gesture which was instantly answered by the road-agent leaving his prisoner to follow. Only a few steps, and not far enough to carry them out of sight, though keen ears could only catch a faint murmuring of tongues from the spot where the traveler stood waiting.

He cast a quick, searching glance around, something as though he contemplated making a bold dash for liberty; but, if so, the notion was as quickly banished. Although he could see no other beings, his strained hearing told him watchful eyes were upon him, and ready hands near enough to intercept any attempt at flight just then.

Realizing this, his cool and steady nerve showed still more clearly. With an audible yawn, he selected a seat on a convenient rock, first covering the cool surface with a handkerchief. And seated with legs comfortably crossed, he produced cigar and match, striking the one to light the other, seemingly content to await the pleasure of those who had so unceremoniously interrupted his journey.

"You're a cool hand, but don't pile it on too thick!" growled the tall mask as he brushed past him to vanish amidst the bushes, leaving the outlaw in a cloak to confront the stranger alone for the time.

"Do you smoke, Veiled Prophet?" languidly drawled the traveler, his head slightly on one side as he returned the keen gaze of the outlaw.

"What if I do?"

"I was hoping not, since this is my last weed; but if you must—"

With a lingering sigh he held forth the cigar like a man bidding adieu to his last friend. There was an angry ejaculation that might well have been an oath—a swift flashing of a steel blade, mingling with a tiny shower of

The Thoroughbred Sport.

sparks, and then the cigar lay severed on the ground.

"Slick as a whistle, pardner," nodded the cool sport as he picked up the glittering blade and tossed it toward its owner. "You've got a keen eye and a mighty true hand—and I've got room for a bit of court-plaster on my favorite knuckle! Got any about you?"

"Who and what are you?" sharply demanded the cloaked road-agent, quickly securing the knife and quivering the blade until the moonbeams danced about its polished surface. "What were you looking for in Silver Lode? Talk straight and clip your words short, if you're not an idiot!"

"Thanks for the 'if,' your Majesty. Hart Oakes by name; gentleman by nature; thoroughbred sport by training. Object, fun, glory, and profit combined. Selah!"

Even as he spoke, the self-styled sport cast a sidelong glance toward the stage-trail, to see his horse brought through the bushes by one of the road-agents. Closely following was the tall outlaw who had first halted him, bearing the belt of arms which had been taken from the traveler before he was permitted to dismount. These tools were dropped to the ground near where the horse was being tied, and the tall fellow whispered hurriedly into the ear of the cloaked chief.

Hart Oakes, to use the name he had given, curiously watched the couple, drawing his own conclusions the while. And careless as he seemed, not a movement took place anywhere about him without his noting and recording it in his mind.

With an impatient gesture the cloaked chief waved the tall outlaw away, then again confronted the cool sport, who now rose to his feet.

"For glory and profit, you say? Please explain your meaning."

"Anything to keep peace in the family, dear fellow," bowed Oakes. "For a good year past I've heard plenty of gossip about Silver Lode and its mighty card-chief, Gypsy Gale. I've heard tell about his piling up mines and prospect holes on a single hand so high that you have to take two looks before getting high enough to call him. And so—well, I do a bit with the papers my own self, you know. And so, as I had nothing of more importance on my hands just at present, I saw it in my way to catch some sport, if I didn't make a grub-stake!"

"In still plainer words?"

"I want to lock horns with this Big Bracer. I want to tackle him while there's hair on his teeth. And I want it—*bad!*"

"Yet you were easy enough to hold up!"

"Because I, really hadn't anything worth fighting for, you see."

"Yet you ought to be mighty well heeled to tackle a high-roller like Gypsy Gale! Where have you hidden your boddle?"

Oakes tapped his own face smilingly as he replied:

"Cheek, and a hand chuck full of bluff, dear fellow! I'm going to strike the old man for a stake, and use it to break his bank. If you don't believe me, go through my wardrobe your own sweet self; but it'll be labor lost, I assure you! And now—may I say good-night?"

The mask laughed but with a shake of the head.

"I reckon you'll have to wait a bit, stranger. You might talk too loud for our little game. You swing a mighty loose tongue of your own."

For a brief space the sport was silent, then he abruptly said:

"Look here, pardner; I'm in a holy hurry! I never did like to wait and linger by the roadside. I started for Silver Lode, and to Silver Lode I'm going, alive or as a ghost! Alive for choice, but—I say!" with his blue eyes glowing with a sudden light as he cast a swift look around, noting the masked shapes which had drawn nearer.

"Well, why don't you say it?"

"I can't pay toll in current coin, for I'm strapped. I can't give you my horse, for I've got awful corns on both heels, and it always did make me sick to tramp it! But—pick out your best man; let him choose the tools that fit his hands best; give us room according to our dimensions, and if I don't lick him *too* quick, I'll subside without a whisper! How does that strike you, partner?"

Again the mask laughed, this time clear and musically.

"You surely have a right to boast of your cheek!"

"Which means—but I haven't time to waste on solving conundrums just now. I want to get to Silver Lode, and when I want a thing, I want it mighty bad! Why not? If I down your champion I go foot-free. If I lose—well, won't you have your fun for your pay?"

"You play it well, but it won't wash, stranger," laughed the mask. "You've other and more urgent reasons for meeting Gypsy Gale than to play cards—any idiot could see as much!"

"That lets me out, but isn't it rather a reflection on the quality of your own brains, dear fellow?" purred the sport, showing his teeth.

The shaft sped home, and with an angry mut-

ter the mask flung off his disguising cloak, then sharply uttered:

"You will have it, fool? All right! I'll fight you myself!"

Now that his blunt challenge was accepted, Hart Oakes seemed to hesitate for an instant, though he quickly rallied and softly said:

"All right, dear fellow, provided you permit me to name the tools."

"Nimble heels, with half a mile start?" sneered the mask.

Hart Oakes took a step nearer, quickly breathing:

"Not so, my dear. If you and I must fight, let it be arms and lips!"

CHAPTER IV.

A COOL HAND.

WITH a smothered ejaculation the mask sprung back a pace, one gloved hand flashing forth the knife with which Hart Oakes had been deprived of his cigar a few minutes before. The lithe, graceful figure crouched like a panther about to leap upon its prey, and through the sable covering glowed and flashed eyes full of rage or consternation.

With left hand supporting his right elbow, and finger gently smoothing his mustaches, Hart Oakes watched the other, smiling grimly in the moonlight, not even turning his head as heavy steps drew near and a strong hand closed on his shoulder with vicious force.

"What was it you said, curse you?" grated the tall outlaw, his grip forcing the sport halfway around, until they stood face to face. "Talk to me, if you must jabber! What was it you said?"

There are always two ways of performing a thing; one right, and the other wrong. Unfortunately for himself, the tall road-agent made a great mistake in his choice of shoulders for his grip, though it may be too much to hint that he stopped to make a choice at all.

His sinewy fingers closed on the arm nearest his coming, which chanced to be the left one, and as Hart Oakes yielded to his savage swing, it carried his own person into the precise position for using his other arm with most telling force.

And use it he did, without so much as a word of reply to that fierce, hardly coherent speech. Back swung his right arm. Forward shot his tight-clinched fist. And the tall road-agent was knocked clear of his feet and hurled endlong a dozen feet away, without so much as the muffled groan which a bullock sometimes gives when the butcher's ax falls heaviest.

"Go to sleep, stranger!" cried the sport, then folded his arms, his athletic figure drawn easily erect as he glanced swiftly around over the startled road-agents.

It all passed so quickly that even yet the majority of them would have been troubled to explain, without pausing for reflection; but one or two had seen that marvelous stroke, and with angry growls they drew their weapons and crouched to leap upon the daring sport.

And only for the panting ejaculation which escaped the lips of the graceful mask who seemed to act as their chief, the sport, cool, nervy athlete though he surely was, would have fared but ill at their hands, unarmed as he was.

With that low cry, the mask sprung forward with uplifted hand in which gleamed the polished blade. So close that leap carried the chief that the extended left hand fairly touched the broad bosom of the sport, while the knife hung ready to sink its length in warm flesh. But Hart Oakes never flinched, never showed a sign of fear, never even unfolded his arms or lifted a hand to ward off death.

Instead, a low, soft laugh parted his red lips, and he said:

"Then you refuse my choice of weapons, my dear knight?"

The mask sunk back on the instant, then tried to cover the involuntary movement by a shrug and a forced laugh.

"Bah! I'm a fool to even think of soiling clean steel with the blood of an idiot or a lunatic! The rope fits your case better!"

"I'm mighty glad you didn't say neck, for I'm terribly ticklish about the windpipe, my dear Mercury!" laughed Oakes, with a mocking bow.

But the chief did not seem to heed, if the speech was heard. With sharp tones came the words:

"Keep him covered, lads! Cut him down if he moves a step, but no burning powder to echo through the hills."

With hurried steps the chief passed over to where the tall road-agent lay in a limp, seemingly lifeless heap, just as he had fallen from that terrible stroke between the eyes.

The sport followed with his eyes, but he did not even move his head. About him crouched near a dozen armed men, ready as they were willing to carry out the sanguinary orders of their chief at the slightest pretext. And, reckless as he had thus far shown himself, Hart Oakes was by no means desirous of becoming a martyr to curiosity.

"Look to him, some of you fellows," came the command of the chief, a few moments later.

"He's only stunned, though the stroke was

enough to crush in any skull of ordinary thickness."

"Lucky fellow, not to hear that humiliating insinuation!" murmured Oakes, as the chief stepped once more within his range of vision.

"Better think of your own luck, you rascal!" retorted the chief, facing the sport angrily.

"You've signed your own death-warrant by striking Ba—that man!" with a hasty correction of the slip.

"Is that so? Well," with a low laugh as his shapely shoulders shrugged again: "One consolation; I've made my signature so plain that all may read who run!"

For a brief space the masked road-agent gazed intently into his face, secure in the sable face-covering. There was strong curiosity as well as anger to be read in those fiery eyes, but Hart Oakes stood the test with careless ease. Whatever might be said of his prudence, he did not lack for cool nerve.

"You're something more than you let on, stranger," at length uttered the chief. "You've not come all this way just for the purpose of measuring skill with Gypsy Gale over the painted papers."

"I'll not deny it—while your lips form the words, my dear," with a bow that lent emphasis to the pronoun.

"Your dear! What under the canopy do you take me for, anyhow?"

"If I was fortunate enough to take you at all, I reckon it would be for better or for worse," laughed the cool sport.

The chief joined in his laughter, with what seemed genuine amusement.

"And that's where the flea bites, is it?" the words unsteady with laughter. "You take me for a woman? And yet they say there's nothing new under the sun!"

The sport glanced quickly over the trim, graceful figure from head to foot in silence, but that look, that smile, spoke plainer than words. It would have been an empty denial from those hidden lips to drive him from the firm belief that the masked chief was indeed one of the opposite sex.

Again the chief laughed, this time with a satisfied cadence.

"All right; let it go at that! I was ever proud of my shape—for I've traveled on it this many a day!—but I never felt as thoroughly satisfied with it as now. For—if you live to hunt after your entertainers this night, I'll never have cause for uneasiness until your opinion changes!"

"Right it is, since you will have it that way," and Hart Oakes also underwent a change of manner; it was as though he resolved to treat this woman—if woman it was—as the masculine being she represented. "After all, I prefer it that way, since you seem to be chief cook and bottle-washer over this precious outfit. Make me that offer over again, and I'll jump at it like a hungry duck at a fat Junebug!"

"He that will not when he may, you know, stranger," with a little nod of derision. "Why should I fight you? Aren't you wholly at my mercy? If you think not—lads?"

"Ready, boss!" came in a prompt chorus.

"If I say turn that sport toes-up?"

"Up they'll go, too quick!"

Eagerly half a dozen road-agents pressed closer to the sport, with bared weapons which looked no more bloodthirsty than the glowing eyes behind those sable masks.

"Ten—no more in sight?" coolly queried Oakes, with a quick glance around him over those menacing figures. "And I'm all here, with both of my hands! Hadn't you better send for reinforcements, ma'am, before sounding your sweet bazaar?"

"Another bit of the bluff you stored up to encounter the Big Bracer with?" sneered the chief.

"The pure quill, my precious," nodded the sport. "If you doubt what I say, you know how to put me to the test."

For a brief space the chief hesitated, and probably this was the reason why one of the road-agents—tall, muscular, brawny-limbed and bull-necked—found courage to step in front of his fellow to say:

"Take him up, boss, fer the glory o' the family! Take him at his own word, an' set me at him! Ef I don't button up his lip, my name ain't—what she am!"

Still the chief hesitated, casting a dubious glance toward the tall road-agent whom the sport had "knocked out" so deftly.

"Never waste a thought on him, my dear," blandly interposed Oakes, readily divining her, or his, reflections. "It will be a good hour before he can feel his feet, and a day before he could fight a sick kitten. There's plenty of time for polishing off this sweet duck, if you only think so. It would be really a pity not to drive a little solid sense into his empty pate!"

"Talk's good enough now, critter," grinned the road-agent behind his mask, but with a certain viciousness in his tones that told how earnestly he longed to avenge the fall of the tall road-agent, and how perfect was his confidence in his own prowess. "But let the boss give the word, an' we'll see how much you pan out."

"Twelve ounces to the pound, and never a drop of water necessary, pardner," laughed the sport, seemingly just as confident of making his boasts good. "I'm pure metal from top to the lowest level. Not that I want to boast, mind you," seriously, "for I couldn't if I tried. Fact is, I was built just that way!"

Unless Hart Oakes was in sober earnest in his wish to test conclusions with this burly athlete, his glib tongue carried him beyond the bounds of prudence. This last speech seemed to turn the scale with the being whom he firmly believed to be a woman in masculine garb, and with a hard, metallic ring in her voice she cried:

"You will have it, both of you!"

"I don't ax any better, boss!" grinned the outlaw.

"I'll read him a lesson with pleasure, ma'am," bowed Oakes. "I'm not at all particular how he takes it, either. While I don't claim to be a master with every weapon, I reckon I can afford a little sport with anything, from clapper-clawing to gory galore."

"If it was a duel with tongues, no doubt you'd soon talk my best man to death, but we'll try sterner tools, with your permission."

"Let him name his preference, unless you prefer to choose."

"Any way'll suit me slick enough," with a grim chuckle, "but if I'm to take my pick o' dyin', why I raally think I'd like to hev the critter knock the head o' me off, like he did him!" with a nod toward the now stirring road-agent.

"So much the better!" and the eyes of the chief flashed visibly. "We can't afford to have any extra noise, for reasons. And—ready with a few gags, lads, to fill the fellow's mouth when he begins to roar for mercy."

"You ain't *that* sort of critter, are you, big pard?" innocently asked Oakes as he critically watched the road-agent, now stripping for the fray with undisguised eagerness. "Because I want to know it if you are, before we begin work. Of course I mean to lick you out of your socks, but if you're a two-legged steam calliope, ready to let off thunder at a rap on the safety valve, I'm going to thrash you so sudden it'll all be over before the first holler can get out! Got to, you see!"

"I unhook my tongue when I goes in fer a scrap, pardner," laughed the big athlete, growing good-natured with the nearing prospect of a fight. "Ef you don't do the hollerin' act, I reckon we'll hev to let the job out to some o' the boys."

For all his assumed or actual confidence, Hart Oakes closely and critically scanned his adversary while he stripped, finding him far more dangerous looking as he appeared in the buff to his waist. If he possessed as much skill as he did strength, victory would not be lightly won by the cool sport.

"Are you backing out already?" tauntingly cried the chief, as Hart Oakes made no attempt to strip. "Shall the lads put some fire into your veins by anointing your back with hickory oil?"

"I'm ready, your Majesty," bowed Oakes. "I've never yet met a man I needed to strip for in the ring."

CHAPTER V.

STEEL ARMS AND IRON FISTS.

FALLING easily and naturally from his lips, this did not sound near so much like boasting as it may look in cold type. Either Hart Oakes felt all the confidence he displayed, or else he was a past master in the art of dissimulation.

His cool confidence seemed to sting the road-agent chief sharply.

"Two to one that you get whipped with your clothes on, then!"

The sport flashed a brief glance over his shoulder toward the irritated challenger, a brief smile playing about his mustached lips.

"Sorry I can't take you up, ma'am, but cheek isn't currency here, and then—well, I never could bear to win off a lady. And, don't you see, I've got to come out top o' this heap, else my pard here will never be able to wear his hat again without borrowing a shoe-horn."

But for all his light chatter, it was easy to see that this wandering sport by no means undervalued his opponent. His keen eyes noted every movement of the brawny athlete, in each one of which something concerning his strength, his suppleness, his ability to either attack or defend might be learned.

The fellow stood all of six feet in height, and with the single exception of his bullet head, was built in fair proportion. Possibly he was a few pounds too heavy, judged from a purely pugilistic standpoint, but that very weight would tell all the more when he closed with his antagonist, for it was not mere useless fat, but solid brawn and sinew.

"Pity the rules and regulations of polite society won't admit of your floating 'round loose in Greek Slave attire, pardner," nodded the sport, as he leisurely walked around the big fellow, whose muscle-knotted arms were being vigorously rubbed down by a couple of his mates. "With dry-goods on, you looked a clumsy lout, good enough to back a plow or bear a bull-team

company, but mighty uninteresting in a ring with an artist ready for hand-painting."

"Mebbe I kin keep you from fallin' to sleep over *your* knittin'," laughed the big fellow, with growing good-humor.

"I really begin to believe it, too," nodded Oakes, as he completed his circuit, but with nothing else to indicate a loss of his former almost contemptuous confidence.

"All eyes open, lads!" jeeringly cried the masked chief. "His feathers are beginning to droop! Next thing he'll jump the pit, true to his loud-crowing strain."

For the first time since having his journey arrested, Hart Oakes showed signs of irritation, possibly because these insulting insinuations came in a tone that, more than ever, sounded feminine. The clear moonlight showed a slight flush tinging his cheeks, and his own tones were a little harder than usual as he uttered:

"Now I know you're a woman! A man wouldn't make such a fling in the face of a fellow standing alone in a gang of such numbers, without better cause than I've given you so far."

"Tongue for tongue, stranger," with a shrug.

"I'm always ready to back my words with something more substantial—"

"With cheek, for instance?"

"With good money, my dear," once more the cool, careless sport. "If you pass your word as a—call it man, if you prefer."

"Man goes. What about it?"

Hart Oakes turned on his heel and pushed through the circle of road-agents until he gained the side of his horse. He bent alongside the animal for a moment or two, then turned again with a tight roll of what looked like bank bills in his hand.

"Those who bide can find, my dear sir," he laughed as low ejaculations of angry wonder broke from the masked lips about him. "Cheek is a mighty good thing to travel on, but it's just as well to have a little boodle to fall back on in an emergency—such as this, for instance!"

"What do you mean? Are you mad, to flash a roll like that before our eyes?" sharply demanded the chief.

"Not if you are white. A bit ago you seemed eager to squander your wealth in odds on big pardner, yonder, eating me up. Though I expect nothing else than to have you rob me, without even a show for my roll, I'm too thoroughbred a sport to let such a bluff pass over my shoulder without a grab at it. Now—"

The mask waved an impatient hand, and swift as thought a dozen strong hands fastened upon the gambler. There was a brief struggle, but as the roll of money was torn from his hands, Hart Oakes instantly gave over his efforts to resist.

The chief gave another signal, and he was set free. There came a mocking laugh as the gloved hand deftly caught the package of bills tossed toward its owner.

"Bluff for bluff, stranger! And I reckon mine pans out richest!"

There was no word of reply, but in the clear moonlight all could see how scornfully the sport's lip curled as he gazed into that masked face. Then he turned half aside, unbuttoning and stripping off his coat, folding it up and placing it, with his hat, near where his horse was standing hitched.

Was it chance, or through a deliberate purpose, that the garments covered over the belt of weapons of which he had been stripped when first held up by the road-agents?

In either case, not one of the enemy appeared to note the fact, so coolly, so naturally was it performed. And quickly stepping back, Hart Oakes spoke to his chosen adversary, his tones cold and menacing:

"It's hard lines on you, pardner, but I've got to get even somehow! I only meant to play with you, but now it's pure business!"

"That's the way I spell my name, critter!" with a laugh.

"Be as good as your name, Ben!" grated the chief. "Break his neck!"

These venomous words wrought a sudden and complete change in the road-agent champion. His laughter was heard no more. He tore the disengaging mask from his face and hurled it aside as he faced the sport. His deep-sunken eyes, small and pig-like, fairly glowed with evil passions, and it was only too evident that he fully intended to carry out the orders of his chief, did that lay in his power.

"That settles it, boss," he growled, in deep, ugly tones. "What you says goes fer rocks! An' ef it's *that* way, no need o' keepin' the mug o' me hid any longer, fer he'll never be able to blow the gaff!"

"Thanks, pardner," smiled Oakes, as his hands went up in an easy and graceful manner. "I never like to paint behind a curtain, and the way I'll improve that bull-dog mug of yours will—Steady, lad!"

Break-neck Ben was warily slipping within reach, and believing himself within distance, sent out a massive fist with force enough to brain a bullock, had it fairly reached its mark. But with cool nerve and marvelous quickness, Oakes moved his head aside sufficiently to let

the blow brush past his cheek, at the same instant countering with his left and stopping with his right.

It was all swift as thought, and while Break-neck Ben's friends were looking to see the sport falling endlong, they saw their champion staggering back with blood gushing from his cheek where those iron knuckles had cut to the bone.

"Why didn't you get out of the way, pardner?" mocked Oakes, lightly poised on his feet, his hands moving easily in readiness for a blow or a guard. "I tried to show you how, but—"

"Down him, you clumsy cur!" viciously cried the chief.

Break-neck Ben promptly responded, but that deaf stroke, under which his right eye was already closing, had taught him a shrewd lesson, and his actions were those of a good fighter who knows he has a hard job cut out for him. Overconfidence had cost him one point. He could not afford to lose another.

Foot to foot, yet constantly shifting as they endeavored to find a favorable opening, the gladiators sparred warily, each man proving himself more a master than a novice. Cool as an iceberg, Hart Oakes bided his time, knowing that each passing minute rendered Break-neck Ben less dangerous with his fists, through his sight being impaired.

Ben also realized this, but could do little to help it just then. Twice he feinted, and barely escaped a vicious counter by his agility. In all his experience he had never before "put up his hands" with a more dangerous antagonist, and the knowledge stung him sharply. He had set this wandering sport down as a far better fighter with his tongue than with his fists, and had counted on an easy victory. But now—

The fists of the sport moved more and more rapidly. His left foot slipped along until it overlapped that of the big athlete, and then, with a peculiar hitch and lock, his toes half-tripped the other, throwing Break-neck Ben partially off his balance for a single instant. No great space of time, but long enough for the lightning sport to get in some terribly effective work.

Thump—thump—thump! From under the shaken guard came the strokes, delivered at only half-arm, but cutting through skin and flesh almost as cleanly as though each knuckle was armed with a steel blade!

Break-neck Ben instantly rallied, but that shapely head seemed to swing on a pivot, and deftly evaded his furious blows. And when he changed his tactics, lunging out low instead, the ever ready guard was there, stopping or turning aside his massive fist without a seeming effort.

"Close with him, you idiot!" cried the chief, in fierce rage.

But, Hart Oakes sprung swiftly aside, delivering one more terrible blow as his nearly blinded antagonist tried to obey. The big fellow staggered, but quickly recovered himself and again rushed to close.

It was madness, but already he was convinced that he stood hardly the ghost of a show with this tough customer at out-fighting, and he was willing to accept some punishment for the chance of grappling. But Oakes was not yet ready for that phase. He knew that he must conquer or die. He knew that each passing moment was bringing the big athlete down nearer his own weight. And a rough-and-tumble past had taught him the folly of taking worse than he was absolutely obliged to.

Light as a dancing-master on his feet, the sport evaded those almost blind rushes, now and then "propping" his antagonist when a sure opening offered itself, improving each advantage with lightning celerity, yet making every blow count one in the score of victory.

But with each point thus won, Oakes felt that he was adding to his own peril. More than once he had narrowly escaped being tripped by a treacherous foot from behind, and he expected with each change of position to feel a still clearer proof of hatred on the part of the road-agents who saw how nearly beaten was their champion.

"Play fair, you devils!" he angrily panted, at the third attempt to destroy his balance. "I'll fight you all in turn, but—"

Another savage rush from Break-neck Ben cut his words short, and feeling that he must win in short order if he was to win at all, the sport met his burly antagonist breast to breast.

"Now I hev got ye!" snarled the big road-agent, in savage joy.

"Crush in his ribs!"

"Snap his spine!"

"Break his blessed neck, glorious Ben!"

The last cry came from the chief, and it gave Hart Oakes the assurance that he must kill or be killed, banishing every trace of mercy which had until then lingered in his heart.

For an instant the two men stood motionless, tightlocked in each other's arms, gathering their powers for the final effort. Then—

A swift reeling to and fro. A score seconds of horrible striving for the advantage. Then—a dozen legs seemed twinkling in the moonlight and the champions fell in a heap to the ground. A dull, snapping sound—a smothered, groan-

ing gasp—then one man lay with head doubled under his body, while the other sprung lightly to his feet, safe and unharmed. And that man was Hart Oakes!

A brief silence, then a fierce, vengeful roar from the lips of the road-agents whose champion lay with broken neck in their midst.

CHAPTER VI.

A BOLD BREAK FOR FREEDOM.

WITH that vengeful roar weapons came to light, and the entire gang of outlaws seemed on the point of leaping in a body on the man who had served their picked champion precisely as they had urged Break-neck Ben to serve him instead.

Pale, panting with the tremendous efforts which had been crowned by complete victory, Hart Oakes never flinched, never uttered a cry or a word in pleading for life. He backed away toward his horse, but it was with face toward the enemy; with a face that surely showed not a trace of physical fear.

But, just as the end seemed at hand, a quick cry came from the masked chief. A gloved hand was uplifted, and a quick leap carried that lithe figure partly between the outlaws and their longed-for victim.

"Hark! I hear hoof-strokes. Never mind him for now—there's bigger game afoot! Back to the trail! Take him—dead or alive!"

The voice did not lift high enough to drown the rapid clatter of iron-shod hoofs beating on a rocky trail, clear and distinct on the night-air, though plainly still at some little distance. And as the sounds became wholly unmistakable, the chief darted from the open space into the bushes, closely followed by nearly all of the gang, apparently forgetting their first captive.

It will be remembered that, though he had at first laughed to scorn the idea of stripping for the duel, Hart Oakes had in the end removed his coat and hat, placing them near the spot where his horse was tethered, and actually covering with them the weapons of which he had been deprived before being permitted to alight from the saddle.

This was due to a sudden conviction that, win or lose in his fight with Break-neck Ben, he would not be permitted to escape captivity unless he could take the road-agents off their guard. And it was in hopes of being enabled to thus regain his weapons that Oakes removed his outer garments.

Even before the road-agents, he knew that Break-neck Ben had met the same fate which he was so fiercely urged to inflict on another. In the fall, the sport had added his own weight, and he felt, rather than heard, the dull snapping of the spinal column beneath his broad chest.

Frightful though that brief struggle had been, he retained coolness and clearness of brain enough to know that vengeance would not be long in coming, and blindly as his staggering back had seemed, it was all in his prearranged plans. Each step carried him closer to his good horse, his trusty weapons. If he could once fairly gain possession of them, might he not open a path to escape through the ranks of his enemies?

Even as the masked chief uttered that warning cry, Hart Oakes was ready to make the last leap which would carry him to a means of saving his life dearly. And as she—if his suspicions as to her sex were correct—sprung forward, he very naturally fell back, as if in fear.

His foot touched the coat. Under it he could feel the barrel of a heavy revolver. And as the chief poured forth those excited sentences, he crouched quickly as though with the intention of resuming his discarded garments.

He saw them rush toward the stage trail, and a breath of relief crossed his lips, for he felt that escape was assured. He snatched up his coat and hat, slipping them on in haste, just as he saw one of the road-agents wheel at the edge of the bushes and face that way, bare knife flashing in his stern grip.

"Han's up, durn ye!" grated the fellow, striding back.

"Sure—confound the hat!" spluttered Oakes, a swift nod sending his felt fluttering to the ground again, and he stooped hurriedly as though solely intent on recovering it, but, instead, snatching a revolver from its holster and cocking it with the same motion.

Possibly the road-agent caught the double click as the hammer was drawn back; or, it may be, he jumped at that movement as a plausible pretext for avenging the death of his comrade. At all events, he leaped forward with uplifted knife.

Leaped forward—to meet his doom!

Without attempting to regain his feet, Hart Oakes covered the desperate rascal and fired, sending a bullet through his scowling forehead, true as though placed there by hand.

With a wild cry the fellow staggered back, his arms flying up, his knife flashing through the moonlight as it left his unnerved fingers, falling back in a quivering heap.

A single effort snapped the halter-strap with which the good steed was secured, and a cat-like leap carried Oakes into the saddle, his voice lifted high in generous warning to the approaching rider:

"Road-agents! Back for your life!"

His heels were digging sharply into the flanks of his steed, and even as the first words escaped his lips, Hart Oakes tore across the moonlighted space, clearing the corpse of Break-neck Ben with a bound, then crashing through the bushes between that point and the stage trail, heading away from Silver Lode.

Daring, reckless as he was, he dared not attempt to face in the contrary direction, urgent as was his desire to reach Silver Lode. In that direction the road-agents had hastened, and he could not hope to run the gantlet of a dozen revolvers and yet escape with life.

Even as it was, the call was terribly close.

The pistol-shot, the death-cry, that warning shout, all combined to tell the outlaws what had transpired, and momeutarily forgetful of their chief's stern orders as to silence, the desperadoes broke forth into wild yells of rage and venomous cursings. And when Hart Oakes, knowing no other course to pursue, broke through the bushes into the regular trail, he was sighted on the instant and pistol bullets came whistling after him.

One more shout of warning while making sure there were no enemies directly in front of him, then the sport bent low along his horse's back, giving him free rein and urging him to top speed with voice and armed heels.

A red-hot iron seemed to flash along his shoulder-blade, sending a pang so acute through his entire person that he gave a short gasp that might have been a prayer for mercy had there been time enough to spare, for he thought his vitals were pierced in that first pang. But only for an instant. Then, from past experience, he knew that the lead had barely broken the skin as it made a passage through his clothes.

His horse gave a wild snort, leaping madly forward at the same time, as if stung by a score of hornets.

"You've got it—got it bad, poor fellow!" mechanically muttered the sport as he freed his feet from the stirrup in expectation of a sudden collapse and headlong fall.

But it did not come at once, though, as a turn in the trail, carried him out of sight and out of range of the road-agents, he could see that his passage was being marked by blood-drops over the rocky soil.

Instinct told him that this mad pace could not long be maintained, and when he felt the horse resist his pressure on the bit, still racing on as though in frantic terror, he realized the worst. When a slackening came, it would be because of death!

Turning in the saddle, pistol in hand, Hart Oakes glanced back as far as the turn in the trail, grating his teeth sternly as, an instant later, he saw several figures dash into view, mounted and in pursuit.

Instinctively he raised his revolver, but lowered it again without firing. The distance was too great, the light far too uncertain for anything like a sure shot, and he was not a man to waste his lead idly.

"Time enough, I reckon," with a short, hard laugh as he felt his steed give a spasmodic stagger in its stride. "You've got to bring a bigger army than that along before I do much foot-racing this night!"

He sat ready to leap clear of the falling animal when the inevitable collapse should come, but this was not nearly so soon as he anticipated. After that one sharp staggering, the noble creature, spurred by the lead in its vitals, dashed along the winding trail with unabated rapidity. It seemed cruel to permit this, and Oakes even tightened the bridle-reins with the instinctive sympathy of a generous man; but as at first, the stricken animal resisted the strain, only speeding on the more rapidly for the effort.

"He'll run until death comes to stop him, poor brute!" muttered the sport, grief mingling with the angry hatred in his tones. "If I had the photograph of the devil whose hand sped that cursed bullet!"

For ten minutes longer that mad ride continued without a break, without any perceptible slackening of pace. Long since his pursuers were lost to sight, either distanced or else abandoning the chase as being in vain. Then, without warning and before Oakes could make a move to prevent, even had he felt so inclined, the maddened steed veered sharply to the left, leaving the regular stage-road for a narrower cut between two high rocks, darkened by the bushes and stunted trees above.

"It's all right, if they don't try to follow the blood," the sport muttered as his horse dashed on through the pass, entering a gradual expansion where the way was lighter. "I don't want to go back—I'm bound for Silver Lode, and I'll get there with both feet, too!"

A few hundred yards further along, and the death-stricken steed flung up its head with an almost human groan. The end was nigh. Blood flew from its open mouth with each breath. Its swollen sides seemed to shrink and contract. A convulsive shiver sent a curious thrill through the legs of the sport. Then, after one mad series of leaps, the poor creature plunged headlong to the ground, rolling over and over until brought up by a huge boulder.

Hart Oakes lightly came down on his feet,

and quickly recovering from the shock, he approached the animal, revolver in hand, mercy in his heart if killing was in his mind.

But there was no need. The noble creature was already out of its sufferings, having raced until death came to its relief.

The sport cut loose the saddle and removed the bridle, casting both aside as useless. He gently composed the contracting limbs, and with his handkerchief wiped the blood from its nostrils.

Until this was done, he gave no thought to himself. It was the action of a man true to the core. And if there was a moisture in his eye, a swelling in his throat as he turned away, who shall blame or ridicule him? Had not the poor creature saved his life at the cost of his own?

With hurried steps Hart Oakes kept on until out of sight of the boulder which served to mark the death of his horse. Then once more the cool, steady-nerved man of the world, he set about summing up.

"I'm bound for Silver Lode. More now than ever! For I'm open to bet odds that my precious gang hangs out right there or thereabouts. And my dainty darling owes me a snug little boodle—or sweet satisfaction in lieu thereof.

"But how to get there? Ay! there's the rub! Bigger game afoot, eh? More boodle? More—no matter what. The facts are plain enough: that trail is temporarily blocked for me. I can wait if I have to, but it don't swell my corpus with pure delight; waiting makes me hungry, and I reckon I could surround half a beef this very minute if I had it."

He arose with a shake of his shoulders from the boulder upon which he had been resting, and after a keen glance about, up at the star-studded heavens, he set off at a brisk pace through the wild region.

"I'll come out somewhere if I keep on long enough."

That part of the country was wholly strange to him, though Silver Lode was almost the only mining-district into which his roving life had not carried him before this. He had no positive idea of the precise direction in which the little town lay, though the trend of the stage-trail gave him some vague notion.

The ground was rough and broken, difficult to travel over and hard to keep to any particular course, even while the clear moonlight lasted. But presently broken clouds began to appear, obscuring the stars and at times fairly blotting out the moon. And though he kept moving on, it was not long before the sport felt pretty confident that he was lost.

"If it wasn't for owning up beaten, I'd—"

His keen eye caught sight of a skulking shadow, and drawing a pistol, he sunk down behind a convenient rock, feeling that his enemies had run him down.

CHAPTER VII.

BLOCKADING THE TRAILS.

SHARPLY stung as her temper had been by the nimble-tongued sport, and viciously as she thirsted to see Break-neck Ben put his deadly threats into execution, the chances are that the woman chief of the road-agents would have permitted her men to close in and wreak their vengeance on the unexpected victor, only for that sudden clatter of iron-shod hoofs on the stage-trail.

For a few minutes she had quite forgotten the purpose for which that trail was being blockaded, but those sounds quickly banished all other thoughts. The Thoroughbred Sport was but an accidental side-issue, and without caring or stopping to think how he might improve the chance thus presented, she uttered that hurried warning, herself the first to take action upon it.

The distance to the stage-trail was but short, and the clatter of hoof-strokes traveled far and fast on the clear night air, but not until she gained the road, weapons in hand, and assured herself that the wild rider had not yet passed nor hove in sight, she never once caught her breath.

"Quick, lads!" she panted, her tones harsh and strained, very different from the really musical ones with which, for the most part, she had addressed the stranger sport. "You know what to do—to your positions, and make clean, sure work of it now! Ducats if you prove a success—bullets if you make a failure of it!"

Crouching close beside the stage-trail, hidden from the direction from whence came those warning hoof-strokes, with revolver cocked and ready in her gloved right hand, her eyes flashing plainly through their sable covering as she gazed through the foliage, more than ever did she resemble a human panther about to spring upon her prey.

All thoughts of Hart Oakes were gone. It was not by her orders that the burly road-agent had lagged behind his fellows in a savage thirst for blood to avenge the death of his wrestling partner. And her first intimation of this came through that death-shot, that horrible outburst from the stricken outlaw, that loud, ringing cry of warning from the lips of the sport as he leap-

ed into the saddle and tore away in his dash for life and liberty.

With the first alarm, her strained hearing detected the fact of those hoof-strokes abruptly ceasing, as if the horseman, alarmed by the shot had wrenched his steed short up to listen further. A burst of frightful fury seized upon her as she felt her prize in danger of slipping fairly out of her grasp, and her pistol was the first one to salute Hart Oakes as he burst into view through the fringe of bushes.

"Drop him! Riddle him through and through!" the woman chief fairly screamed, springing from her covert and emptying a revolver as fast as her trained fingers could work.

The shadows were lit up with a lurid glow as pistols cracked in irregular succession, but the cool sport seemed to bear a charmed life, for he and his good horse rapidly grew indistinct under the moonlight.

"Mount, you three rascals!" viciously added the woman chief, her voice hardly recognizable even by those who knew it best. "Chase and rake him in for keeps!"

"And the Big Bracer?" hoarsely cried the tall road-agent who had first felt the weight of Hart Oakes's fist.

A choked, gurgling cry came from the masked lips, and their owner turned abruptly on the speaker, steadyng herself by a grasp on his arm as she panted:

"He must not—he can't escape! If he turns back—Ha!"

The firing had ceased, because Hart Oakes had passed out of sight around the bend in the stage-trail. The three road-agents who had their horses close at hand, prepared for quite a different emergency, were already speeding down the road in hot chase.

The noise they made was not sufficient to smother a shrill, peculiar call which came floating through the night from a point at or very nigh the spot where the unseen rider wrenched in his steed.

The woman chief sprung from the ground in her excitement as she recognized this signal—for signal it was. And the tall road-agent ground a savage curse betwixt his teeth as he steadied himself against the handy rock, yet weak and dazed by that knock-down blow.

"Something's gone wrong, for a thousand!" he muttered, hoarsely.

"Croaker!" harshly panted the woman chief, striking spitefully at his masked face with her clinched fist, then springing a few paces up the road, pausing to utter a clear, sharp cry, bending her head in breathless attention for the result.

It came right promptly. Another short whistle, and the sound of hoof-strokes almost immediately following it.

Two-score seconds later a horseman sprung to the ground in front of the woman chief, hurriedly uttering:

"The boss sent me with word. There's a bu'st up, an'—"

"In one word, you thick-tongue!" viciously grated the chief, her hand gripping the messenger by the arm, shaking it with truly feminine passion. "He's slipped through our fingers?"

"No—that's a good chainte fer—"

"All right!" and his arm was dropped as suddenly as it had been gripped, the woman chief giving a long breath of intense relief. "Take your time. If you're lying, I'll blow your brains out!"

As she fell back, the tall road-agent came forward.

"It's all right, Dabney," he said, quietly, recognizing the messenger and feeling that he was in need of a little reassurance after such an unexpected reception. "The little boss is stirred up over a bit of trouble that happened on us just now, but he means all right. Tell me: what has happened? What word did your boss send this way?"

Cautiously edging around so as to place that tall figure between himself and the "little boss," Dabney hurriedly made his report.

He briefly alluded to the discovery of Todd Undermill's suicide, and the attempt to arrest Gypsy Gale which so promptly followed. He spoke of the manner in which the big gambler broke away from the mob, thanks to his not being caught inside his house.

A grating oath bissed through the clinched teeth of the tall road-agent at this, and "the little boss" spitefully echoed the sound.

Dabney shrank back, hurriedly adding:

"The boss was thar, an' we all acted on his hints. You cain't fault me fer what I didn't know an' couldn't holp."

"But Big Bracer—he got clear?"

"I don't see how he could, when they was a clean peck o' lead sent chuck arter him, but—waal, I never hed no time to see. The boss told me to straddle critter an' race to let you all know. He said you was to drap a guard at every side-trail whar the Big Bracer could possibly try a sneak through, an'—"

"Bottle the rest for now. Get your cattle, lads!"

The half-score varlets who still remained near, sprung from the road into the bushes in prompt obedience, while the tall road-agent and the woman chief hurried back to the scene of

the fight between Hart Oakes and Break-neck Ben, the former crushing an oath betwixt his teeth as he paused for an instant over the brain-pierced corpse of the road-agent who had fallen in his thirst for revenge on the slayer of his pard.

"Two good men gone! And just when we need such tools the most!"

The woman chief shivered perceptibly, shrinking away from the ugly spectacle, though her tones were sharp enough:

"Your fool chipping in started it all, Bark Matson. As though I could not have handled the glib-tongued sport without—"

"What's done is done, queen, and we can't afford to quarrel over it at this stage," coldly interposed Matson, as he secured both sable masks and thrust them into his pocket. "There's no time to spare for them now. If any outsider stumbles over them, let him solve the puzzle to his own liking. If all goes well, we'll give them a decent burial. If not—well, let their ghosts do the blaming!"

The sound of horses plunging through the bushes became plainer, and with a celerity that told how little she relished such ghastly associations, the woman chief sped from the scene of death, to nimbly fill a saddle. She rode in accordance with the garb worn, and that with an ease and firmness which proved this was not the first similar exploit in which she had been engaged.

Not five minutes in all had elapsed since the first sound of Dabney's approach, yet the night was once more silent as the road-agents paused for orders. Their chief turned an ear toward the point where Hart Oakes and his pursuers had vanished from sight, but not a sound came back to tell of their success or failure.

"They've bagged him, or else he's out-footed them!" snapped the woman chief as she sent her horse forward at a sharp trot, Bark Matson keeping her close company, with Dabney close at his flank.

"The last, I hope and believe," viciously grated the tall road-agent, his right hand gripping hardly at his side. "I want to settle accounts with him my own self, and I will, if—"

"I'm thinking more of Gypsy Gale!"

"Satan still sticks to his elbow, it seems!" with a short, harsh laugh. "Is it all pure luck, I wonder? Can a common man always fill to his draw like that? If I had time, cursed if I wouldn't be tempted to stop long enough to cast a silver bullet—for luck!"

Though uttered half-laughingly, there was much of sober earnestness in Bark Matson's words just then. And, superstition-proof though she had long considered herself, Queen Esther shivered as she listened.

Up to that hour the game had seemed so simple, so certainly won, all save the gathering in the rich stakes. And now—

At a sharp command two of the party fell out of the ranks, to hold watch and ward over the first side-trail entering the regular road, and by which the Big Bracer might possibly attempt to escape.

On again at a brisk lope, to pause once, twice more before the end was reached, each time leaving a couple of armed guards behind, with brief, stern orders:

"Take him in if he comes your way, lads. Take him in—dead or alive!"

That was all, but surely it was enough when spoken in those musical yet strangely hard and merciless tones!

Hardly had the third pair of watchers been left behind when all instinctively drew rein, wrenching their steeds up so sharply that more than one pair of haunches brushed the rocky trail.

Faint and indistinct came sounds floating to their ears from the front. Yet only a single breath of listening was required to solve the meaning of the alarm.

"They've got him, dead or alive!" cried Queen Esther, slackening rein and plying spurs at the same instant. "The game's good as won!"

The sound of human voices raised in savage exultation. A pack of hungry wolves, fighting over a choice morsel of food could not have given birth to a more utterly vicious sound!

"Didn't I know it?" grinned Dabney, exultantly. "Didn't I know the durned critter couldn't tote off all that peck o' lead?"

With Queen Esther in advance, each animal racing at full speed under the impulse of hand and spur, the party clattered noisily along the rocky road, their own clamor shutting out all further sounds from in advance, and thus it was that not one of their number was prepared for the disagreeable surprise which awaited them a few moments later.

Keen-eyed, the woman chief caught sight of a familiar figure out in a patch of moonlight, facing her coming, grim and silent. Exultantly she swung her black belt in the air. And wrenching in her panting steed when almost within its own length from that tall figure, she nimbly sprung to the ground, excitedly asking:

"You've got him, after all? Alive or dead? Show me what—"

A short, hard laugh cut her speech short, and a deft hand removed the mask which she still wore, as the growl came shortly:

"Are you crazy to come like this? Half the town is here, and—"

"You've raked him in?" she persisted, slouching her hat quickly.

"There's his horse, but he's slipped through our fingers!"

CHAPTER VIII.

FOR MORE THAN LIFE.

IT is barely possible that Gypsy Gale might have stolen away from his tumble-down stable unseen under cover of the clamor which the mob kept up in front of his house, but he was already smarting intensely under the treacherous blows of those who had planned his disgrace and death—who had struck at him in an even tenderer spot,

Right or wrong, he believed he recognized his worst enemy hanging on the skirt of the mob, and it was the sight of Judd Varley's tall, comely figure that led him into such a rash defiance.

Even as he exposed himself, Gypsy Gale knew that he was acting in foolhardiness, if not with criminal rashness, considering what he had only that evening discovered. He knew that more than life hung on his swift and decided action. Yet—his usual coolness had deserted him, and he took the rash step already recorded.

Even as he did so, he realized his terrible mistake, and crushing down the hot rage and hatred which surged in his heart at sight of his enemy, he tried all he knew how to avert the consequences.

Only pausing to send one bullet hissing on a just mission of revenge, and feeling that the risk was well worth it when he saw Judd Varley stagger back, though he could not know that his lead had barely broken the skin over one temple, he wheeled and sped away, bending low over the withers of his animal to avoid the hurtling lead which came in vicious spurts from the mob.

Twice in swift succession his flesh quivered as he felt the tearing, numbing yet exquisite pain which tells of wounds the instant they are received. His heart seemed to leap into his mouth as his horse stumbled, for he knew that the poor creature could not entirely have escaped through that leaden storm.

He mechanically freed his feet from the stirrups, ready to leap and face his enemies when dismounted, but a sudden faintness fell upon his brain and unnerved his sinews.

Was it death? Had the end come so soon?

Through his benumbed brain these questions floated, then for a space he knew nothing with distinctness. Like one in a nightmare he felt that his good steed was still racing, still striving to carry its doomed master beyond the merciless grip of his enemies. Faint, dreamlike, indistinct and seemingly miles and leagues away, was the yelling of the mob and the scattered reports of their fire-arms. And then—

How long that blank lasted, Gypsy Gale never knew.

Smarting from more than one deep wound, his horse dashed on through the night, unguided by its master's hand, choosing its own course, running much as, a short space afterward, the gallant steed of Hart Oakes raced to its death. With body swaying unsteadily, but kept from falling out of the saddle by the death-grip fastened in the thick mane, Gypsy Gale was carried through the toils.

There was one point in the fugitive's favor. Not one of the mob was mounted when first approaching his house, and though chase was promptly made on foot by the more impetuous of the party, all such were rapidly left behind by the bullet-stung steed.

It was a rather curious coincidence, but Gypsy Gale was carried at speed by his wounded horse until death overtook the noble beast. The ending came almost without warning. The mad pace slackened abruptly. The poor creature staggered on a few rods further, then sunk down in a heap, gasping, groaning in almost human tones.

Gypsy Gale was dimly conscious of this fact. Still, like one in a dream, he knew the end had come, but he could not throw off the strange stupor which had fallen over his overtired brain.

As the horse dropped, he fell headlong from the saddle, lying without sense or motion—for how long a period he never knew.

The clatter of hoofs aroused him. He lifted his head to stare at a phantom-like horseman rushing past, only a few rods distant. The animal gave a snort and shied violently, almost unseating its rider, but who quickly regained his balance, cursing viciously as he struck his frightened mount.

This was the messenger sent to warn the woman chief of the escape of their grand prize.

With the curious spell broken, Gypsy Gale staggered to his feet, feeling of his limbs, touching his wounds. So far as he could tell in his still dazed condition, he was not seriously hurt in body or limb, though more than one blood-dampened spot on his clothing told of bullet-wounds received in that first desperate dash.

"For her—for my little girl!"

Gaspingly the words escaped his lips; forced,

The Thoroughbred Sport.

rather, as he felt his brain again begin to whirl and a bloody mist, sprinkled with fiery spots, to gather before his eyes.

"For Olly—for my little pet!"

For a few moments it was doubtful whether his will could gain the precious victory. He staggered dizzily on his wide-spread legs. A horrible sickness attacked his stomach. It seemed as though he must lie down—just for a single moment!

"For Olly—for Olly—for Olly!"

Over and over the wounded gambler repeated these words, trying to shout them aloud, the more clearly to impress them upon his brain. And then, reeling, with arms outstretched as he groped like one stricken with sudden and complete blindness, Gypsy Gale moved away from the spot where his steed lay dead, and where his bitter, bloodthirsty enemies were so soon to gather.

It was a fight for life, ten-fold more bitter than death, but with a dull, unreasoning doggedness, the big gambler fought it out to the end. Over and over he repeated those words, striving to make clear to his dazed brain the full import of the watchword. And, little by little, his aim was accomplished. His brain grew steadier, clearer, more capable of understanding how much hung on his escape with life and reason. Bit by bit the bloody mist faded away. Clearer grew his vision and steadier his steps, until—an age, it seemed, but in reality only a few minutes after the passage of the plotters messenger aroused him to action—he hurried on through the hills, more like his old self.

The heavens were yet clear, though it was plain a storm of some kind was brewing, or else that the night air was bringing with it the news of a more distant tempest. The light was sufficient for making out all prominent landmarks, but for some little time Gypsy Gale failed to recognize any of those surrounding him.

Little marvel this, since he had no means of knowing how far his steed had borne him before dropping in death, nor in which direction his blind efforts had been turned since leaving that spot.

And then his poor brain had not yet entirely recovered from the benumbing effects of the shot which had torn through his scalp, nor his powers of vision wholly returned.

He dared not stop to study out his location. He knew now that his life had been declared forfeit. The sight of Judd Varley among the excited mob told him so much, when added to the earlier discovery he had made.

"If it was only against me, I'd turn and fight it out!" he muttered, through his suddenly clinching teeth. "But—there's Olly! What can those devils have against her? Why have they set a trap for the poor child? Why—if my lead only sped true to its aim! I saw him throw up his hands and reel back! But—did I kill him?"

If he could only be sure of so much!

Little by little Gypsy Gale began to see clearer, and to feel that he was narrowing down his range of guesses. His frequent hunting expeditions through the wilds surrounding Silver Lode had rendered him tolerably familiar with the country, though, where all was so wild and broken, it was hard to distinguish one ragged peak from another. Harder still since he had seen them only under the bright sunlight, until now.

But finally he knew that he could not be mistaken. Yonder was the identical spur of rock on which an ugly brute of a bear had panned him, unawares, and where he had to kill or be slain on the instant.

He paused for a few minutes the better to study out his position.

"They'll be guarding the stage route, almost beyond a doubt," he frowningly reflected. "They'll surely look for me in that direction. But what else can I do? I've got to get there! For Olly—for Olly!"

There was magic in the name, now his brain had grown clearer. His irresolution vanished. He looked to his weapons which, fortunately for him, had remained in their holsters all through his blind flight, his fall, his aimless stagings, and with another keen glance around him to guard against possible mistakes, he pressed on with doubled speed.

Blood had crusted over his wounds, and they no longer bled. The strange numbness had left his limbs, and he seemed to gain strength with his exertions. He moved through the rugged wilds as briskly as though he had never been injured.

He was heading for the nearest point where he could possibly enter the stage road, and paused for nothing until that point was gained.

He had forgotten his first doubts, and for the moment he had no thought of personal danger as he hurried along the sloping rocks to strike the comparatively smooth road beyond, when—

"Hands up, ye devil!" cried a harsh voice as two men leaped out of cover almost directly in his path, the words blending with a double report as their revolvers flashed redly.

Gypsy Gale staggered dizzily, dropping to his knees, only kept from falling prone by the hand which he instinctively flung out. A burning

pain filled his breast, and he believed that death was upon him!

It was more savage instinct than reason that caused him to jerk out a revolver and discharge it at his exultant foemen. It was pure habit, born of long and thorough practice, that sent his lead so true.

With a choking curse, the foremost man reeled, spun around on his heel twice with wildly extended arms, to fall in a shivering heap an instant later.

Like an echo of his first shot, Gypsy Gale fired again, just as the second road-agent dodged back and aside. A snarling oath told how keenly the rascal was stung, but his hurt was not sufficient to keep him from darting back to cover, nor from sending a vicious shot toward the giant gambler.

This missile flew wide, but cast a tiny shower of lead and rock splinters into the face of the wounded fugitive. The pain seemed to arouse him, and he sunk on his stomach, rapidly crawling to the nearest cover: a clump of dense bushes hard by.

As he did so, another bullet came splintering its way through the gnarled stems, and following it a shrill, far-reaching yell from the lips of the hidden rascal.

Gypsy Gale instinctively divined the truth, and it served to clear his brain once more.

"He's calling for help!" he muttered, frowning darkly as he strove to catch a glimpse of the enemy without exposing his own person too plainly. "I've got to get out—"

Two more shots in rapid succession, and an ear-splitting yell cut his mutterings short.

A single glance showed him his only chance for life and liberty. He must steal away, keeping the bushes between himself and the road-agent until hidden behind the rocks. It would be almost certain death to attempt flight along the stage trail, even if he had only this one foe-man to deal with. But others must be in reach of a human voice, else why this repeated shouting?

At least one bullet had entered his chest, but he dared not pause to investigate them. Even as he began his cautious retreat, Gypsy Gale heard—or fancied he heard—distant shouts in response to the repeated cries of the enemy before him.

"I must—for Olly!" he muttered, grinding his teeth to kill the horrible pain which then spread through his entire bosom.

And repeating the name of the one whom alone he loved of all the human race, the hunted gambler crept silently away until a mass of rock lent him securer cover. Then he rose to his feet, crowding a bit of his shirt into his latest wound, to check the weakening flow of blood.

CHAPTER IX.

TRYING A BLUFF.

THE skulking shadow moved out into the edge of moonlight, and instead of the human foeman whom the sport was expecting, a gaunt gray wolf stood revealed, its pointed nose lifted into a lugubrious howl. To wheel and dash away the next moment as it sighted the man.

Hart Oakes leaned against a dead stub, removing his hat to let the cool night air fan his heated brow. He glanced about him with an air of disgust, that was duplicated in his tones.

"I said I'd get there with both feet, and I meant it from 'way back, too. But will I? Is there an artificial hoof manufactory to be found anywhere nigh? Because I'll need one, and need it bad, if I don't strike daylight or Silver Lode right away pretty quick!"

The sport shifted his weight from one foot to the other, as there was more truth than poetry in his whimsical plaint.

Ever since parting with his dead horse, he had pushed briskly on through that broken region, following a general course which, if persisted in, he believed would eventually carry him to or near Silver Lode. Although he had good reason to know that the stage trail was guarded by desperate characters for some desperate purpose, it could hardly be that they commanded its entire extent.

"Anyway I'll risk another turn-up with the gang, rather than keep on barking my blessed shins by trying to down this rocky road to Dublin! It's too much like swarming up the side of a ten-story house, just for the fun of sliding back again."

And so, drawing as complete a mental map of the district as possible, the wandering sport shaped his course, as he believed, so as to regain the stage route a few miles beyond the point where he had been held up by the road-agent gang under the woman chief.

"Bless her!" with a short, grim laugh as he replaced his hat and resumed his uncertain progress. She owes me a roll of green rags, or its equivalent; which for choice? Tell you better after I've taken one good squint at what's kept hidden under that black mask."

There was something in the thought that seemed to lend spurs to the roving sport's heels. He strode on at a brisker rate, his brain busy with the woman chief and her reasons for

blockading the trail. He wondered what could be "the bigger game" which had called her hounds away from his throat just as he could begin to feel their teeth.

"What's the matter with finding it all out? Boodle's gone. I'm strapped. Couldn't buy a single straw if haystacks were selling at a penny a thousand! Why not? Who says I won't?"

The clouds, in broken, scattered bunches, were flying swifter across the heavens, though none of the wind which impelled them seemed to fall as low as the earth. It was no easy task to keep track of even the more prominent stars, and, as often proves the case to a stranger at sea in an unknown region, the moon itself seemed to be capriciously altering and shifting its location without rhyme or reason,

With no more definite guides, it is not so strange that Hart Oakes should become lost. He was shrewd enough to realize this, and obstinate enough to keep doggedly pressing on.

"Unless the road has got a most infernal twist on itself to-night, I'll hit it in the end, that's dead sure!" he reasoned to himself.

He felt that he had made a full half-circle, and that now he must be heading direct for the trail, which could not be so very far in advance, considering how steadily he had been walking.

"And when I do strike it, bet your socks I'm going to freeze fast to my grip, though a regiment of petticoats in trowsers chips in!"

This obstinacy seemed to bring its own reward, for within a very few minutes after resuming his travel after that brief halt by the lightning-blasted tree, Oakes struck what appeared in that uncertain light to be a traveled trail, heading almost directly with his deliberately-chosen course.

"There's nothing like knowing when you're certain of a thing!" he laughed, in self-approval. "All the guide-books say you want to go just the way you don't want to go, when you've lost yourself; but I never did believe that any too hard, and now I'm going to get out a new edition, according to Hoyle!"

Feeling that his trials were in a fair way to be distanced, the sport pressed along the new route, keeping a keen lookout the while, expecting with each passing minute to catch his first glimpse of the regular road to Silver Lode. Instead, he was fated to make quite a different, and not nearly so welcome a discovery.

The moon was sailing through a broad space entirely free from clouds, and her silvery beams fell fairly on the face and figure of the wanderer, thanks to the warmth born of his exertions, which had caused him to remove his hat for a few moments.

Only for this, it is almost certain Hart Oakes would have been halted after a far different fashion by the trio who so greedily watched his approach from cover. As it was, they broke cover, weapons in hand, as one of their number harshly challenged:

"Fins elevated, pardner, if you please!"

For the second time that night the sport was taken completely by surprise. In his eager longing to regain the stage-route, he had forgotten the probability of being waylaid by the gang from which he had escaped at the cost of a dead horse and a smarting shoulder. Not until the trio sprung forth and held him covered to a dead certainty, had he even the ghost of a suspicion.

"Up they go, gents!" he promptly cried, the same motion dropping his hat upon his head. "What next?"

That single glance showed him these fellows wore no masks, but he felt morally certain they were a portion of the same gang led by the woman chief, though he wondered that they had spoken before burning powder. Since they had—who could say?

"They've got me lined. They could riddle me before I could touch a gun. They're some of the old gang. Then she's given orders not to shoot unless I show fight!"

One can think with marvelous rapidity in an emergency, and all of this flashed across the sport's brain while his hands were being lifted in response to that sharp challenge. He knew he would be killed if he attempted to resist just then. There was a chance in submission, and he was cool enough to promptly accept it.

"Whar you from, pardner?"

"Almost anywhere—suit yourselves, gentlemen."

"You ain't from camp—or ef you be, durned ef I kin place ye!"

"Anyway, he ain't our game—wuss luck!" growled another.

A thrill ran through the sport as he heard these words, for now he knew that his first surmise was incorrect; these fellows did not belong to the gang of road-agents. Or, if they did, they certainly could not have been among those who had taken him captive, else they would have instantly recognized him again.

Rough enough they looked. Armed to the teeth, and handling their tools as though they would ask nothing better than a fair excuse for making use of them on his precious person. If not outlaws, who and what were they?

"Because I haven't used in these parts very long, mayhap," he said on a venture, keenly watching for a favorable cue.

He dared not declare his identity, just yet, lest the trio prove in reality part of the woman chief's command, set to cut off his escape.

"They's somethin' in the cut o' his jib—keep your fins high up, mate, an' sail a little furder this way. We ain't takin' no long resks, an' business is business."

"And I'm his prophet!" laughed the sport, outwardly cool and unconcerned, as though fully able to clear himself of all taint. "I don't swear we've ever met before, for I've a terrible good memory for forgetting names and faces; but I do say you'll find me square as a die and dead sure to turn up just the number of pips you need to make a winning sure! Ain't that enough?"

"It's a mighty slick tongue you wag, anyway, mate," half-grinned the rough, as he craned his long neck the sooner to recognize this glib speaker. "You're jest like me; I never forget a mug I've once logged, and—blow me tight if I ever clapped peepers onto yourn afore!"

Sharp suspicion leaped into his beady eyes and rung out in his tones. His pistol-hand raised until a black muzzle stared the sport full in the face. But Hart Oakes never flinched an atom. And his voice was calmly critical as he smoothly uttered:

"A forty-five; big enough for an elephant, and sure death with the right sort of eyes to back it up! But you're slovenly, man! There's rust enough in the muzzle to give a poor devil blood-poisoning, if you only raked his bark off a weenty bit."

"Cheese that stuff, mate! Who be ye, an' what ye doin' sailin' out this way? Whar do ye hail from, anyway?"

"Last from Silver Lode," was the prompt response, catching at a desperate hope, though he knew that death might follow failure.

"I never see you thar, anyway," dubiously muttered the fellow.

"Nur yit me," promptly supplemented another, while his comrade gave a surly growl of suspicion.

"All the same—but why should you?" with a short laugh, as though he had stumbled on a satisfactory solution. "Two days ago I hadn't clapped eyes on the burgh, and after I got there I had to sleep off a dizzy old drunk, for—"

"What brung you out here, then?"

"Pretty much what brought you, I reckon," adding with lowered tones and a swift, suspicious glance around as though fearing the presence of unwelcome ears in hiding. "Big game—hist!"

"More like you're tryin' to help the Big Bracer!"

Hart Oakes felt that he had sufficient cue to plunge boldly into the dark, and he took the leap without hesitation.

"I'll go you evens that I come nearer to bagging him than any of your bunch; and that's giving odds of three to one! Name your figures mate, and don't be careful to put them too little!" he bluntly cried, thrusting one hand into a pocket as if eager to squander his wealth.

For a single breath it seemed as though his bold bluff would carry him through without further trouble. The three roughs, seeing he made no signs of resistance, had grown careless, and though their hands still clasped their weapons, the muzzles were no longer covering their human game. They interchanged doubting glances, then the spokesman said:

"You talk mighty slick, but ef you're really the right sort—who's your boss? Who's runnin' the machine?"

It was a question which Hart Oakes hoped would not be thrust at him, but now it had come, he made the best of a bad bargain.

That air of shrewd mystery came back into his face. He shook his head knowingly as he chuckled:

"Couldn't think of naming names, pardner! A man of honor never tears the veil from a lady's face, you ought to know!"

It was a bold bluff, but somehow it failed to act precisely as the audacious sport hoped it would. One of the roughs gave a sudden start of new-born suspicion as he ejaculated:

"Durned ef I don't b'lieve—dollars to cents he's the strange sport that cracked the neck o' Break-neck Ben!"

"Oh, now, really, pard!" reproachfully murmured Oakes, lifting one hand in deprecation. "Do I *really* look like a neck-breaker? Do I?"

"You're mighty slick, stranger, but not quite slick enough," the first rough growled, surlily. "Mebbe you're what you claim, an' mebbe you're sailin' under false colors. Either way, I reckon we'll bev to ax you to heave to an' stay with us until we kin make it out a bit pla ner than the signals read jest now."

"Which means?" softly asked the sport.

"That we'll hold you under our guns until—"

Glibly enough the rough spoke up to this point, but then his eyes protruded wildly and his tongue failed him, for the cool sport sprung into instant action, a pair of ugly-looking revolvers clasped in his hands, both muzzles seeming to cover each one of the trio as he said:

"Sorry to kick, gents, but—up hands, all of you!"

CHAPTER X.

A FIST FULL OF TRUMPS.

THERE is nothing like a wild life to make a man a good judge of danger. No persop has a greater respect than an expert in the use of that handy tool, and none can more readily read "shoot" in the eyes or face of an adversary than your old fire-eater.

So it was in this case. Caught entirely off their guard by this nervy sport, the three roughs cowered before his tools, making no attempt to call their own weapons into play, even though each man still held a revolver in his grip; but muzzles were down with them, and up at a level with Oakes. That makes all the difference between victory and defeat in such an emergency.

True, if all moved in concert, one would be morally certain to get in a sure shot, at such close quarters; but the other two? "Dead for a ducat!"

And it was so terribly puzzling to say which woud be the lucky last man!

No one understood this sort of reasoning better than Hart Oakes himself, and this it was, no doubt, that helped to make him so cool and confident.

He laughed shortly at their ludicrous dismay, but that laugh lent a doubly significant emphasis to his repetition:

"Hands up, gentlemen, if you please!"

As he uttered the words, he stepped swiftly to one side, thus carrying himself to a position which would render an "accidental" shot as the armed hands were being elevated, altogether too obvious for safety on their part. And at the same time he sharply added:

"Careful of your trigger-fingers, too! If a gun goes off its owner will never live to catch the report. Business, gentlemen!"

Every point was guarded against. They dared not demur, and in sullen silence their hands went up at full length of their arms.

"In one time and two motions," laughed the sport, still with that peculiar skill which seemed to keep three men covered by two pistols. "I'll have to discharge you from the awkward squad, after all, despite your clumsiness in losing the drop when you had it snug enough!"

"What sort o' deal are you givin' us, anyway?" growled the fellow who had until now kept silence, so far as speech went.

"So you have a tongue of your own, Beauty?" in mock surprise. "I was just wondering whose cat had committed suicide—but that don't count! Deal? Well, you furnished the pack and did all the stocking. I'm simply running off the cards you set up, and if you were dull enough to let me change seats between deals, that's your fault!"

"We didn't mean nothin', mate," sulkily muttered the first speaker. "We only—"

"Bit off more than you could chew—precisely," mocked the sport, then changing his tones and manner with startling abruptness: "I mean something, and that something is bloody murder at your first crooked move, my fine laddy-bucks! First—listen and heed!"

"I'm going to cut your claws, to keep you from not meanin' nothin' never no more, in case you should run up against another stray tramp of my caliber. I don't want to cut *too* deep. I never could bear the sig'at of red blood! But—if I have to do it, bet your sweet life I'll make a mighty clean job of the whole three!"

There was no response, though the cool sport paused long enough for a brief one, in case they felt thus inclined. Sulky, vicious, ugly in thought as they were in face, the trapped roughs awaited what was to prove the outcome. Only—woe be unto Hart Oakes should they ever succeed in turning the tables on him after this humiliation.

"I'm one of the most tender-hearted critters you ever run up against, gentlemen," Oakes added, seeing how keenly his light talk was stinging them, and not averse to enjoying a little revenge for the severe tax they had put upon his brain in slipping out of the toils. "If I wasn't, I'd order without warning. As it is—mark what I say!"

"I know you're only part of an infernal gang of cut-throats who seem to make this particular region their stamping-ground. I dare say you've got dead oodles of mates near enough to catch a lusty yelp or a pistol-shot. But they couldn't get here quick enough to do any more than weep over your melancholy carcasses—for it's mighty hard to find a workman who can mend the human roof after a forty-five has been on an investigating tour through that delectable region!"

"Better that then be talked to death!" growled the salt rough.

"Score one for you, mate," laughed Oakes, lightly. "And as reward, I'll jump right down to business, without further sermonizing."

"There's a flat rock right behind you. You'll turn to the rightabout when I bid you, and see how close you can hug that rock with your bay-windows. If, unfortunately, either or all of you should make a misstep; if you should try to take leg-bail; if you shoul'd accidentally let off a gun, either at wind or your humble servant: then the funeral would be ready, all but starting! You sabe, John?"

Still no response. Doubtless none of them thought it necessary.

"Wheel—straw-foot, hay-foot—halt!"

Obedience was prompt, since they could go no further in that direction. Already they were pressing hard against the perpendicular face of the huge bowlder, with their hands, armed and unarmed, held at full length above their heads.

"Good lads!" approvingly cried Oakes, as he slipped one pistol back into its holster, his left hand being free then to secure the arms in possession of the three roughs. "I'll make something out of you yet—if it's only cold meat."

With the muzzle of his revolver pressed significantly against the base of the sailor's skull, he gently removed the revolver from his uplifted hand. And in like manner did he disarm each of the others, slipping the weapons into his belt while his nimble hands thoroughly searched their persons for other tools.

"Squirm if I happen to touch your tickle, gentlemen, but don't try to holler, I beg of you!" he blandly uttered while thus engaged.

"Try to believe that I'm no pickpocket for revenue, if it isn't too severe a strain on your training. I lost a bit of boodle a while ago, and I'm ready to take oath that your little boss in trowsers got it; but you wasn't with that part of the gang, which lets you out that much."

Each belt of weapons and cartridges were removed, and as he stepped back into clearer light to more readily examine his captures Hart Oakes made another discovery. Leaning against an angle of the big rock against which his trio of captives were now "spread-eagled," were two Winchester rifles, both repeaters.

"Who owned these rifles?" he sharply demanded, flashing a glance around as if expecting to sight other enemies.

"We did," sullenly replied the sailor. "We wasn't lookin' fer you comin', an' when we sighted you, was skeered to sneak fer the guns, lest you ketch sight an' haul off too quick."

The response was too sulky, as well as likely, for Oakes to doubt its perfect truth, and his new-born suspicions were cast aside as he took possession of the weapons. He saw that each magazine was full, and both guns in perfect working order, and he set one aside for future use in case his adventures were not at an end for that night.

"What're you goin' to do with us, anyway?"

"Well, now, dear fellow, you're so awfully sudden with your questions, don't you know?" drawled Oakes, as he emptied each pistol of its loads, hurling the cartridges far away with a motion as though sowing grain, serving each belt save one after the same fashion.

"You don't dast to kill us, anyway!"

"Not? May I inquire the full reasons of your belief, mate?"

"Beca'se we've got plenty o' mates who'll look us up—that's why!" with savage emphasis. "Beca'se they'll rake the hull globe over but they'll git more'n even if you do—that's why!"

"That's the matter from your standpoint, is it, mate? Well, wait until I've done a bit of armoring, and maybe I'll present my side."

With deft skill he slipped the cylinders out of the revolvers, hurling each one far away among the rocks, each in a different direction. With a strong hand he bent each frame against a hard rock, so that it would be impossible to fit them with fresh cylinders without the aid or tools of a gunsmith. Tossing the useless weapons out of sight, he snapped each bright blade, treating the fragments after the same unceremonious fashion. Emptying the magazine of the extra Winchester, he thrust the barrel into a narrow crack between two rocks, throwing his weight upon the breech until the barrel bent perceptibly, rendering the weapon useless for anything like correct shooting. This, too, he hurled far away, then moved a little nearer the prisoners, who still maintained their uncomfortably erect position close to the huge bowlder.

"Business first, now for a bit of pleasure, gentlemen," he said in easy tones as he stood with hands behind him, smiling at their awkward situation. "I've done all the talking up to date; now it's your turn. And as a starter—what set you fellows all on the hunt for the Big Bracer?"

There was no reply, unless a sulky growl might be called one.

"There's more ways than one to skin a cat, and I reckon I can cut a key to your talking organs from some of these bushes, if I have to."

"Fer killin' a man, durn ye!" snarled one of the trio.

"Don't be quite so emphatic, dear fellow," purred the sport, but with an undercurrent of menace. "What man, and why?"

"Todd Undermill. Beca'se he kicked at cheatin'—that's why!"

"I want to know! Unreasonable fellow—for kicking instead of rustling about fer a slicker trick! And—who's this woman boss of yours?"

Sharp and distinct came the query, evidently in hopes of taking the fellows off their guard. But, if so, they gave no signs.

"I don't know no woman-boss. We's jest out with the crowd. It was a free racket, an' we pitched in with both han's—wuss luck to us!"

"You will lie?" with sharp emphasis. "You are really hungry for the rod? If not, better

unbutton your lips wide enough to let out the whole truth. I say it for your own sake. I'm constitutionally lazy, but when I do get down to earnest work, I never know when to let up. I'd hate most awfully to wake up and find I'd licked one or two or three of you to death, but—who is that woman in trowsers?"

There was no response. The prisoners moved uneasily, as though fearing the consequences, or else stirred by an impulse to turn and risk all in one desperate fight for life. But before another move could be made, the faint echo of hoofs on a rocky trail came floating on the night air to the ears of all.

Only for a single moment, as it were. Then the sound died away, to be replaced by another: the clear, mellow notes of a hunting-horn, as it seemed.

Hart Oakes was listening intently, holding his breath lest a single sound should escape him. And for an instant he was partially off his guard, almost forgetting that he had three strong, desperate enemies so near at hand.

It was clear enough that they, also, had heard those significant sounds—even more significant to their ears than to Oakes himself. They were motionless for an instant, then the sailor ventured to turn his head far enough to one side to steal a glance at the sport.

He saw that those keen eyes were averted. He saw that there was just the glimmer of a chance for turning the tables on their captor, if all were to act in prompt concert, and a low mutter parted his lips.

His mates heard and understood his meaning, but, unfortunately for their hopes, Hart Oakes was equally quick-eared, and sharply cried:

"Easy, you idiots! I've got a fist full of trumps, and—"

"On him!" grated the sailor, ducking low as he wheeled to leap at their captor. "He don't dare shoot, fer—"

"How's that for a shot, my hearty?" cried Oakes, as he leaped forward, his hard fist striking the sailor full between the eyes and hurling him backward like a log. "Knuckles are trumps, and I've got the pick o' the whole deck!"

"You Cain't lick us *all*, durn ye!" grated the burly rough, as he rushed forward, trying to grapple at once, his huge fists and brawny arms thrust ahead as a safeguard against another such a stroke.

CHAPTER XI.

GROPING IN THE DARK.

FINGERS of steel closed on one of those big wrists, swinging the muscle-knotted arms upward without entirely checking the bull-like rush of the desperado. There was no time to cut to waste in "fine touches of the art," and Oakes was content to risk one blow for the chance of getting in a stroke clean enough to put this fellow out of the fight at once.

Instead of a blow, the rough tried to grapple with him, growling savage as a hungry bear, until the sound was sharply cut short by that terrible fist. With a crack loud enough to herald broken knuckles and a shattered skull as well, the sport drove his immediate antagonist dizzily backward, blinded—for the moment no more dangerous than a dead man.

It was just as well that the blow needed no repetition, since the third outlaw—or tough citizen—was fairly upon the thoroughbred. If a little more sluggish in starting, he meant to "get there just the same," as he himself would probably have expressed the sentiment.

Hart Oakes had barely time to see that a stone-armed hand was sweeping with deadly force direct at his head. He could not wholly avoid it, thanks to his prior engagements, but he did the best he could under the pressure. With a quick shifting of his head and a surging forward, he received the blow on his left shoulder, back of the collar-bone, the heavy shock coming almost altogether from the hand and wrist of the vicious rascal.

Still, it staggered him a bit, and for a single breath he feared that some bones were broken, but that did not hinder him from driving a fist at half-arm into that bearded face. The stroke was wicked and left its mark in red letters, but the fellow was tough and instantly grappled with the sport, viciously snarling:

"Do 'im up while I hold—"

He left the sentence incomplete, for he had no breath to spare in directing the movements of his comrades. For, just as he had met the blind rush of Break-neck Ben a little earlier in the evening, so the Thoroughbred Sport locked his arms of steel about the desperado, casting all his enormous strength into the effort, risking all on a single cast of the die, knowing that he must conquer this man at once, or not at all.

Back and forth for a single instant the foes swayed, then with a mighty heave and toss Oakes tore the fellow from his footing, whirled him half-over in the air, then flung him headlong upon the rocks.

Just so had he disposed of the road-agents' champion, with the exception of adding his own weight to the terrible fall. Now he tore himself free from those muscular arms, though the effort caused him to stagger, and doubtless in part saved the rough from punishment.

Through no motives of mercy was this. Knowing as he did that the rascal would have brained him with his first stroke if possible, Oakes felt little inclined toward mercy; but even as he wrestled he saw at least one of the other men rising to his feet.

"Tumble up and get knocked down, gents!" panted the Thoroughbred Sport, just as though he really enjoyed the violent exercise.

But the cordial invitation was not accepted. Already the cowed knave was taking to his heels, darting hastily around the end of the big boulder, sending out wild yell after yell, plainly summoning others to the scene.

Hart Oakes made one cat-like bound after the rascal, one hand gripping a pistol-butt; but then he paused with a short, hard laugh parting his red lips as he glanced from one to the other of his conquered foemen, both lying as though touched by the finger of death.

"Go it, you sinner! Bring on the whole family. If I was only dead sure I'm fighting on the legal side, blessed if I don't believe I'd linger to furnish music for the outfit free of charge! As it is—"

He stooped for a moment over each of the fallen men. The sailor was beginning to gasp and moan, and that practiced eye readily saw that nothing worse than a headache would result. The other ruffian seemed in a worse case, but his neck was not broken, and Oakes hardly dared stop for a more thorough examination.

"I would if I could, but if I can't, how can I?" he muttered, rising and bending a listening ear once more.

He heard the retreating bellow of the frightened rascal whose heels were trusted more than his other members, but no answering yells. There was nothing to show that fresh enemies were approaching, though he could account for those hoof-strokes and the hunting-horn in no other manner.

He sprung forward, Winchester in hand, until he reached the place where he had until that moment felt confident the regular stage route must run; only to pause and stare about him with a bewildered air.

"Did the pesky critter take it up and run away with it? If not—it was here, a bit ago, and I just know it."

Few of us like to own up mistaken, and Hart Oakes felt that way just then. The stage road was not there. Neither was there any sign of a traveled route leading in any direction. Even the trail on which he had traveled so nimbly a few minutes before, seemed to come to an abrupt ending against the big boulder.

He pressed ahead for a few rods further, only to find the rocks lying thicker, the lay of the ground growing more and more difficult for a footman, without saying anything of wheeled vehicles. To the right and the left the country seemed a little more open, but in neither direction could he see aught to encourage him in his quest.

"I'll play surgeon and coax those rascals—if they don't bite off and swallow their own tongues out of pure spite before I can get back to 'em!" he muttered, retracing his steps.

To find the two rascals still lying unconscious, gasping, groaning at intervals. And probably he would have put his new scheme into execution, had he been given a little more leisure. But just as he was stooping over the sailor, an ugly chorus broke out at no very great distance, prominent in which he fancied he could detect the coarse notes of his runaway.

Beyond a doubt the rascal had met a squad of his fellows, and was guiding them back in search of revenge.

"If I had a license for shooting vermin, I'd make it interesting for a little while, anyway!" muttered Oakes, his blue eyes flashing angrily as he gripped his repeater. "As it is—I'll see you later, I trust, gentlemen!"

Prompt and ready to fight as he had shown himself that night, the sport was not all fool-hardiness. From the yells and shouts he could tell that quite a little army of men were approaching, and though he was just angry enough to believe that he could stand them off, for a time at least, reason told him to beat a hasty retreat.

"Maybe they were speaking part truth, you know," he reasoned to himself as he hastened away over the moonlighted space, seeking cover before the yelping hounds could sight him. "Maybe they are out after a murderer. If so, I'd be a fool to mix up any deeper in it!"

It was difficult for him to believe, even yet, that he had fallen into a mistake in his calculations, but, nevertheless, such was a fact. The three roughs spoke true when they said they were searching for Gypsy Gale. They were part of the gang really under command of Judd Valley, and not of those stationed as trail-watchers by Queen Esther, though they had heard something of this cool sport, and his turning the tables on Break-neck Ben.

Little the worse for his rapid fighting, though his shoulder felt bruised and tender—nothing like it would have been had the rock itself struck him, though—Hart Oakes pressed on at a goodly pace, leaving the more open ground, and taking advantage of the rocks and bushes as affording a better chance for eluding pursuit.

Still clinging to the notion that the stage-road must lie in the quarter where he had been ambushed by the hunters of Gypsy Gale, he soon swung around toward that point of the compass, as nearly as he could determine. For, as the night grew older, the signs of a storm increased. The clouds gathered more heavily, mass joining mass, blotting out stars by myriads, and more frequently shutting out the face of the full moon.

After an unusually hard trip and struggle to avert a fall, Oakes came to a halt, dashing the sweat from his heated face, and casting a look of disgust upward at the rolling masses of clouds.

"Why don't ye, if you're going to? I'd give a buzzard of our daddies, if I had it, just for one good square bite out of your dampest quarter! Blessed if I don't begin to think I was born thirsty!"

Once before that night Oakes had declared that it made him tired to walk. Little wonder, then, that he felt thirsty, hungry, disgusted with the clouds for hindering, without affording him the slightest recompense. For one good draught of fresh water he felt that he could afford to stand a thorough drenching.

From first to last it had been a hard night's work for the roving sport, and he felt it none the less because he failed to see any prospect of a speedy termination of his toil.

"Unless I play bear—lie down and suck my own paws for food and drink!" he laughed grimly, rising from the boulder and resuming his journey, without the slightest idea where he would bring up in the end. "Just so it has an end, I'll never kick. It's this forever going without ever getting there that takes the tuck out of a fellow!"

With a grim doggedness in strong contrast to his earlier gay dash, the sport plunged on through the thickening gloom, no longer trying very hard to keep in a direct course, for he had long since given over all belief that the stage-road was located in his mind. He knew that he was lost, and began to doubt whether he had ever been right in his calculations since abandoning his dead steed.

He was beginning to feel heavy-footed, to say naught of the many bruises received by stumbling, slipping, making missteps in the uncertain light. Almost any other man would have given up, preferring to wait for the dawn, even though both hungry and dry; but the more serious the obstacles grew, the more obstinate waxed this rover.

"Silver Lode isn't going to come to Mahomet, and so—"

For an hour longer the sport pressed on through the night, now grown very dark, the clouds blotting out stars and moon alike. Still on, but only to find the way growing more and more difficult with every furlong of progress, until even his obstinacy began to waver and show signs of yielding to the inevitable. He came to a halt, with a muttered oath of disgust—only to catch his breath sharply and bend his ear in listening.

A faint, indistinct roaring sound came floating on the air, now increasing in volume, now dying out until barely perceptible, owing to the freshening or fading of the fickle breeze. His first idea was that the slow-gathering storm was at last breaking forth, but this lasted only a few moments. And then—

"That's it, for a thousand!" he cried, his voice filled with grim exultation. "If that isn't water in a hurry to get somewhere, then I'll never wet my lips again this side of glory!"

Fatigue, sore limbs, parched throat, hollow stomach—all were forgotten for the moment, and picking up his rifle the sport hurried on in the direction from whence the welcome sound proceeded.

Ten minutes more of reckless plunging over or dodging around rocks and tearing through scrubby bushes, all the time over rising ground, sufficed to carry the thirsty sport near enough to his goal to make a truly disgusting discovery.

A river was there, beyond a doubt, but it seemed to send forth its hollow roaring almost from beneath his feet!

"A ditch or only a hole in the ground?" muttered Oakes, as he dropped to his knees and cautiously felt his way through the darkness. "If it isn't more than a mile deep, reckon I'll play I'm a winged angel and take a tumble—now I have got it!"

In almost a shriek the last words burst from his lips as he felt the ground give abruptly beneath his weight—as he felt himself slipping, sliding, bumping rather than falling outright down—to what?

CHAPTER XII.

IT NEVER RAINS BUT IT POURS.

FEET foremost, miraculously retaining an upright position, much as though sliding down a perilously steep hill, yet feeling as though not only his clothes but his flesh was being stripped from his bones by the rocks as he shot past them! Down—for thousands of feet, as it seemed to his whirling brain! Down—to strike some hard object with a shock that apparently drove his legs up into his body, and turned him end for end in swift somersets! Down—with

a splash and a sputter distinguishable to his ears even in that awful moment!

With a choking gasp he rose to the surface, blindly striking out with his arms and legs, swimming mechanically, for that terrible plunge through the darkness to what seemed certain annihilation had almost deprived him of his senses.

And yet—it was all so strange, so improbable!

He was sound in limb. And the almost ice-cold water seemed to restore his senses and wits as by magic!

It was a fall which certainly would have killed ninety-nine men out of every hundred; yet Hart Oakes was alive and comparatively speaking, unhurt.

Only for the utter darkness! If he could only see!

That was the first thought of which he was fairly conscious after rising to the surface of the roaring, tumbling, impetuous stream. His next—ludicrous indeed!

"Can't I drink the channel dry?"

Improbable? Well, almost anything is possible after such an experience, and ridiculous as it may seem, those precise words broke gaspingly from the lips of the young man as a wave lapped his face.

He did drink as he swam, guided only by the direction of the rapid current which tossed him on its bosom as though a mere bit of driftwood instead of a still powerful, hard-fighting man.

The draught served to strengthen him—to smother the dizzy sensation of illness which began to gripe his stomach—and with stronger, more concerted strokes, Hart Oakes tried to cross that swirling current and reach land once more.

A hoarse cry escaped his lips as one hand struck something more substantial than water. Again—but his fingers swept rapidly along the smooth rock—smooth and water-worn and difficult to grasp as though it might have been a plastered wall!

An eddy caught him, twisted him round and round until his head swam and his brain grew dizzy, then cast him out once more to the cruel mercy of the wild stream where its current rushed fastest.

Twice more he fought his way across the current, and twice more his stinging fingers only felt the bare, crackless, water-polished wall of rock! Twice more the malicious eddies toyed with him, whirling him about, ducking his head beneath the surface, choking and strangling him as he painfully gasped for breath.

His boots, his clothes, the rifle strapped across his shoulders, all added to the heavy handicap and helped to shorten his desperate fight for life—never more dear than now, when a dog's death stared him full in the face!

It was a truly frightful experience, and all the more so from the fact that on his next trial, his fingers actually struck a projecting point of rock, clinging there with a death-grip while the water whirled his body swiftly around and dashed it with numbing force against the rock-wall just below. How the roaring demons tugged and jerked! How the watery imps thrashed his feet back and forth, until he felt as though his limbs would soon become disjointed! And the heavy barrel of his rifle kept thumping his skull as though trying its best to knock his dizzy brains out!

And then—bit by bit his fingers slipped.

Throwing all his powers into one despairing effort, he tried to secure a safer hold with his other hand. Only to fail—to feel his insecure hold torn loose—to be whirled and tumbled and buffeted and tossed here and there by the watery devils—for now their wild and malicious laughter plainly rung in his ears.

And yet he fought for life—even while feeling death claiming him as a victim, he fought on.

He tried once more to swim across the current, though his strokes were feeble and languid; still he fought, for his was a nature that could never yield to force while a spark of life lingered with him.

And then—was it death?

As though weary of their merciless sport, the eddies cast him violently against the rocks, then seemed to recede—to leave him on a steady support at last!

Mechanically his fingers dug into a crevice. Instinctively the muscles of his arms contracted and—it was true! He was on a ledge of rock, firm and substantial! And with a choking, gasping cry, he made one more effort—he dragged himself up out of the water, then fell flat on his face, blind, his senses reeling.

And yet, he was not wholly unconscious, though a spell seemed to fetter his limbs and lock his lips. Like one in a dream, dimly, vaguely, he knew that he was not the sole occupant of that ledge. This, though the darkness was too intense for sight, and the roaring of the waters too loud and continuous for hearing sounds outside of it.

He felt, rather than knew, that some person or some thing was drawing nearer to where he lay in his utter helplessness. He fancied he could feel a hot breath fan his cheek for a single instant. And then—surely those were human hands upon his body!

Hands, jaws or paws, they rolled him over upon his back. Something pressed close to his face, as though to second the sense of touch by sight. Was that a snarl? Or—

Still in that dreamy stupor Hart Oakes felt himself dragged further from the water. He was dimly conscious that hands or paws were feeling him all over. He knew that his limbs were roughly handled for some purpose, but that was all. Sleep seemed to fall upon his brain.

It could not have been for any very great extent of time, for the darkness of night was still over all when Hart Oakes, with a spasmodic start, tried to spring to his feet. Only to fail, for his wrists and his ankles were tightly strapped.

He had barely time to realize this much, when an indistinct form loomed up before him, and a deep, harsh voice came to his ears:

"Good! you're still alive, then?"

"I wouldn't like to take oath, but I hope so," slowly, indistinctly replied the sport, with a curious sensation, as of hearing a stranger speak through his lips. "If not—well, I don't see your wings! And I've always held a prejudice against the—a-hem!"

"Who are you?" hoarsely demanded the shadowy figure, thrusting his face still closer, then casting an angry glance toward the rift of sky with its twinkling stars, which now showed beyond the canyon wall. "Will the day never dawn? Is this night to last forever?"

"Shake on that—hello!" seeming to for the first time fully realize his helpless condition. "Trussed up for butchery! Isn't this a rather rough deal on a fellow-pilgrim, pardner?"

A fierce, stinging curse grated through the teeth of the stranger, and long fingers hovered over the face of the helpless sport, as though eager to strangle him outright.

"Rough, you bloodhound? If I hadn't wanted to make sure—if I hadn't felt that I might learn something more from your black lips—I'd have put the thongs around your throat. I'd have strung you up as a warning to the rest of your infernal crew!"

Surely he had run afoul of a madman!

The thought flashed across the still unsettled brain of the helpless sport, and served to rally his mental powers as nothing less startling could have done just then. All at once his dazed, drunken sensations fled, and his brain never felt clearer than at that moment.

The fancy became a settled conviction, and knowing that he could not make an effort to burst his bonds without being discovered by those glowing eyes, Hart Oakes resolved to see what a nimble tongue and fertile imagination could accomplish, backed by plenty of nerve.

"And right there's where your head is level on top, pardner," he briskly responded. "I'm a traveling mine of information, right from col-legal! Ask me what you want, and if I can't enlighten you, I'll never charge a red for my trouble. Anything from love to philosophy—with love for choice! Anything—"

"Where did you come from? How did you get here?" interposed that deep, stern voice, impatiently.

Oakes drew a breath of relief as those long fingers drew away from his throat, and he began to believe he might hold this lunatic in play long enough for some unexpected chance to turn up whereby he could slip out of danger, as he had so often before.

"I rained down from the storm-clouds, pardner—I did, for a melancholy fact," and his tones grew doleful as he spoke on: "I know I did, by the feel of my falling. There isn't a mountain one-tenth as high as the point I started from. I hadn't time to look at my watch, but I'm open to bet my boodle that I was at least one week getting down to the drink—ugh!" with a shiver which had nothing counterfeit in it. "I don't think I'll ever feel thirsty again, if I live to call my great-grandchildren patriarchs!"

There was no immediate response from the stranger. Straining his eyes to pierce the gloom, Oakes could just make out his bowed figure against the darker background. His face seemed averted, and knowing how uncertain are the moods of madmen, the sport resolved to take a risk in striving to burst his bonds asunder.

He dared not risk a violent effort, though he knew that would be more likely to succeed. He gradually exerted his strength, but to his alarm he found his arms almost powerless!

He could move them without actual pain, and thus he knew that no bones were broken; but they seemed weak and nerveless as those of a young child!

He was still stunned and stupefied by this strange discovery, when the supposed madman abruptly turned toward him, uttering harshly:

"Ah! exult in your work, bloodhound! Look at me—try to remember what I was only a few hours ago, and then—see what I am now!"

"Crippled, shorn of my boasted strength, wounded nigh unto death! A fugitive through the crimes of a demon in human shape! Hunted down by a pack of human hounds! Cornered—driven into the last ditch, to die the death of a sheep-killing cur! And—my God!"

His harsh, strained tones grew choked. His head bowed in his hands. His powerful form shivered and trembled perceptibly, even in the midst of that gloomy retreat.

And—surely those were sobs? He was weeping!

Bewildered, his own brain benumbed by the unexpected discovery of his vanished strength, Hart Oakes lay and stared at the strange man into whose power he had so curiously been cast.

Who was he? What was he? Why did he despair so utterly? His limbs were free. He could move at will, and—

The bowed head lifted and those redly glowing eyes—eyes that pierced the gloom with the reddish glimmer of an angry wild beast—turned once more upon the helpless sport.

"Laugh in your sleeve, curse you! Chuckle to yourself over the sight of Gypsy Gale, broken down by his weight of woe—not on his own account, but for fear that worse may happen his—you devil!" and a swift motion brought those viciously working fingers once more close to the bound man's throat as though eager to end it all.

But Hart Oakes never flinched. That name worked a magical change in his bewildered brain. He knew now who and what this man was, and he felt that his own life would not long remain in danger.

"Go a bit slow, pardner, please!" he said, sharply. "I'm not one of your enemies. Instead, I've put in the biggest part of the night fighting against them the best I knew how!"

Gypsy Gale laughed harshly, incredulously, but he drew back again.

"You lie! But I'll hold my hand until the hounds run me down, and then I'll kill you before their very eyes, spite their teeth!"

"Good enough! I'll take a nap until then, if you don't mind!"

CHAPTER XIII.

AS MAN TO MAN.

THIS was not altogether "bluff" on the part of Hart Oakes.

He had undergone enough to wear out almost any human machine that night, and despite his perilous situation, so completely in the power of a hunted man nearly if not quite crazed, there crept over him a longing for rest, for sleep, which was almost irresistible.

Gypsy Gale had half-promised to hold him captive until the coming of his mates before killing him, and though the sport could not tell how soon this decision might be altered by the refugee, he shrewdly reasoned that it would be none the less likely to stand until dawn if he kept himself as far as possible in the background.

"He's got me whenever he wants to foreclose," was one of his grim reflections. "I can't even kick, for a tongue don't count with him, the way he's feeling just now. And so—Murphy, here's coming at ye!"

Doubling his pinioned arms at the elbows to form a pillow of his joined hands, the philosophical sport almost immediately fell asleep.

As for Gypsy Gale, he made no comment, gave no sign when his captive announced his determination to seek his rest. His face was once more averted, his head bowed upon his knees as his long, muscular arms embraced them with tight-locked fingers.

Now and then a low, choked groan came from that direction, but they were not loud enough to waken the sorely-fatigued sport whose life hung on the crazy caprice of this treachery-crazed gambler.

What did rouse him from slumber, Hart Oakes never rightly understood. When he closed his eyes, it was with a feeling as though he could sleep four-and-twenty hours on a stretch if not awakened by positive violence; yet the gray dawn was hardly old enough to reach to the bottom of that deep channel when his lids flew open and his blue eyes fell sharply upon the motionless figure of the giant gambler.

Seated just as when the sport fell asleep, save that now his head was held erect, his sunken eyes roving quickly along the opposite wall which confined the roaring waters. He was on the watch for his merciless foemen, beyond a doubt.

Hart Oakes made no stir, though his limbs felt cramped and full of what might have been rheumatic twinges and tweaks, had he not so clearly recalled his terrible battle for life with the mountain torrent—his natural tobogganing down a miserably rough slide!

But these evils were only minor points just then. With dawning day came back all the powerful love of life and liberty, and in the effort to learn his precise chances in this direction, Oakes temporarily forgot all else.

He fancied he could recognize in this wild refugee the same man whose minute description he had been curious enough to obtain before setting out on his curious pilgrimage; for what he had told Queen Esther regarding his business at Silver Lode was, in the main, truthful. And yet—what must not the poor wretch have suffered before coming to this!

His gigantic frame, once so firmly erect, now

The Thoroughbred Sport.

seemed bowed and warped as though by premature age. His eyes were deeply sunken in his head, and though they glowed with a reddish light from their sockets, they gave the impression that death was not far away.

His garments, once of fine material and modern cut, were torn and soiled, his linen being little better than a breastplate of stiffened blood. His head was bare, his hair—long, straight, looking jet-black in that dim light—falling in elf-locks about his haggard face. On his feet were the torn remnants of fine leather, once riding-boots, now mute evidence of a desperate flight through the stormy night, which sent a shiver through the veins of the watchful sport as he recalled his own harsh experience.

He felt positive there could be no mistake; that this surely must be the man of whom he had heard so much in other mining-camps, and whom he had resolved to "beard in his den," until one or the other of them admitted a superior with the cards. This must be the "big game" which Queen Esther spoke of, and the man for whose sake he had been hunted from pillar to post throughout that "eternal night!"

And yet—he hardly knew just how to address him, helpless as he was for the moment. Though so still and motionless, there was something disagreeably suggestive of the insane about Gypsy Gale, and—

Hart Oakes was saved the trouble of further debating by the giant gambler turning those glittering orbs fairly upon his face, saying:

"You are awake? So is the new day; but it will last longer than you, bloodhound!"

"Morning, pardner!" cheerily ejaculated the sport, just as though the other had not opened his lips to give vent to such disagreeable insinuations. "Was it the breakfast bell I heard just now? I really don't know when I was ever so mighty sharp-set as right this minute!"

Gypsy Gale laughed harshly.

"You'll sup with Satan, or go hungry, curse you!"

"Never mind the supper! It's breakfast I want first. Then lunch. Then a bit of a snack. Then dinner—dinner for seven, with all the trimmings, mind you! And then—well, if you could just manage to smuggle me into the pantry, buttery, kitchen, bake-shop, milk-house, cellar, and all the rest, while dishes are being washed, maybe I could worry along until sup—did you say the devil, pardner?"

Gypsy Gale stared at the glib speaker, just as Hart Oakes had calculated upon. He knew that they had never before met in the flesh, and though he feared the giant gambler had partially lost his reason through fear or suffering, he hoped to ward off his sanguinary purpose long enough for that fact to impress the poor wretch; for surely he would not murder a perfect stranger?

"Who are you?" frowned the gambler, brushing a hand across his brow, leaning further forward and gazing with a perplexed air into the face of his captive. "I can't place you, and yet—you're one of Judd Varley's curs!"

"Never heard the name before, on my honor as a white man, pardner!"

As he spoke thus in clear, emphatic tones, Oakes managed to lift himself into a sitting posture, gazing squarely into the lined and haggard countenance of the refugee.

"I'm no enemy of yours, sir. I've not been hunting you down with any evil purpose, though I'm free to confess that I started for Silver Lode mainly to meet you face to face, as man to man."

Even as the last words passed his lips, Oakes saw how unfortunate had been his selection, thanks to the over-suspicious brain of the well-nigh insane being in whose power he found himself. Those puzzled eyes began to glow with revived suspicion. Those sinewy fingers to twitch and quiver as though longing to close upon his throat in a death-grip.

If he had showed the slightest symptoms of fear, beyond a doubt that speech would have been his last. Instead, he boldly, unflinchingly met Gypsy Gale's mad glare, and sharply added:

"Now, my hands are clear. Murder me if you see fit. I can't fight back, with my hands and feet tied. But I'd rather be the helpless victim than the cowardly assassin, Gypsy Gale!"

It was a desperate bluff, but it was not wholly without effect. The big refugee drew back a bit, the old perplexed look returning to his sunken eyes. And he muttered unsteadily:

"You know me? You call me by name? And yet—"

"I ought to know your name, pardner," with his old lightness and a half laugh. "I've been fighting pretty near all the night on your account. I've been held up by what I thought at the time were road-agents, but who turned out to be a gang set to cut off your flight. But that don't count. I had my own fun out of it, and I'm laying up no hard feelings against you on that score. Only—don't you reckon it's a rather tough deal you're giving me, after all that?"

Oakes lifted his hampered wrists as he spoke, and if there was a laugh on his lips, there was deep anxiety in his heart. For Gypsy Gale showed no signs of taking the hint, no signs of

relenting. Fierce suspicion was battling with perplexity in his brain, showing forth by way of his eyes. A hand was fumbling with the long knife at his waist, but with something that told of flesh-cutting instead of thong-severing.

"I can't place you, and yet—"

Still the same words, as though his brain was dazed and stupefied by all he had undergone that terrible night. Would the light of reason never break forth again? Or would it end in a vicious madness with murder for a finale?

Hart Oakes asked himself these questions, but he could not answer them nearly so surely as he would have liked. He felt that his life hung on a mere thread which might be snapped at any moment. If his hands were only free! If he could fight for that life, even without arms other than those bestowed by nature!

But he permitted naught of this to show itself in his face. That was bold and frank and seemingly unconcerned. There was not a trace of fear or anxiety in his tones; only half-playful reproach as he added:

"And yet you truss me up like a fat turkey for the spit! It isn't a square deal, pardner, and I'll tell you the reason why! I came here to Silver Lode, looking for a fair game. I'd heard many a pretty fairy tale about the high-roller who ruled the roost at that camp, and never turned his shoulder to a bet, let it hold figures enough to break an old-fashioned 'ribmet' all to pieces! And so—well, I picked up my little boodle and set out to lock horns with this Gypsy Gale."

"I run into trouble just after it got good and dark. They took me for you, I reckon, first off; or, it may be, they was afraid to let me pass through lest I smoke something and give you the office if I met you later. Anyway, they held me up. They played boys to my frog, until the boss—a woman in trowsers, I'm open to bet long odds, pardner!"

Gypsy Gale started sharply, again brushing a hand across his brow, and Oakes eagerly watched him, believing he had at last touched the right chord.

"A woman—what woman?" muttered Gale, huskily.

It was a risky thought, but the sport acted upon it.

"It hurts my tongue to talk while my hands are in limbo, pardner," he said with sudden doggedness. "I've done naught to deserve this from your side. I'm not naturally a kicker, but there's times—and this is one of them, I reckon!"

"You spoke of a woman; what woman?" persisted Gypsy Gale.

"I reckon these ropes are making me forget all I ever knew, pardner! If they stay tight a little bit longer, I wouldn't wonder if I was to forget I ever saw a woman!"

"If I set you free, will you promise to—"

Hart Oakes curtly interposed with:

"I'll promise nothing while I'm tied up, hoof and paws, pardner! Set me free, and I'll talk to you until your head swims like a cork, but devil a sputter will you hear until then! It's got to be pure white or clean black from this on. As man to man I'll do all I can to help you out of the hole, but—you sabe, John?"

It was risking all on the turn of a single die, but Hart Oakes felt that it was now or never, and he took the chances as a gambler.

For a brief space Gypsy Gale hesitated, gazing keenly, more like a sane man, into the pale, resolute face of his captive. Slowly his long blade slipped from its sheath, but whether to slay or set at liberty, even the nervy sport could not fully decide just then.

"I've fought hard for you, pardner," he said, coldly, without a sign of emotion in face or voice. "Now slit my throat for being such an infernal idiot!"

Colder, sharper came the last words, and his mustached lips seemed to curl with scorn as he met that doubting gaze. It was risky, but—it won!

Gypsy Gale bent forward and quickly severed the thongs which confined his hands and feet, then shoved toward him his rifle and belt of arms of which he had deprived him in the night, saying slowly:

"I'm only a poor, broken-down cripple, pardner, while you're sound as a dollar; yet I set you free. Now—take me prisoner, and claim the blood-money from your master, Judd Varley!"

CHAPTER XIV.

SUCH A THING AS BEING TOO LUCKY.

HART OAKES slipped a revolver from its scabbard, lifting the hammer and twirling the cylinder deftly around on his left palm, to make sure the tool was in serviceable condition. Then, feeling master of the situation, knowing that he could kill or disable this giant by a simple touch of a finger, he leaned back against the rock wall, speaking in clear, distinct tones:

"I don't feel as though I could take a sick kitten captive, pardner, but a gun makes a baby equal to a giant, if the infant knows how to burn powder in the right direction."

"Shoot—as well that way as any other!" muttered Gypsy Gale, catching his breath sharply as one hand pressed to his bosom, the fingers staining with fresh blood.

"You're hurt—why didn't you say so before, pardner?" cried Oakes, starting forward just in time to support the sinking body in his arms. "Easy, pardner! If I ain't a medicine sharp, I can—Well you have got it—bad!"

The ghost of a smile flickered in the haggard face of the Big Bracer at this sympathetic tone, and he made no resistance as Oakes laid bare the ugly wound; ugly to experienced eyes, though but a little livid spot on the skin through which pulsed the red blood slowly.

Without instruments little could be done save to plug up the vent with a pellet of cotton, then confine it by means of a bandage which he found ready made, but which had slipped out of position. Not only this, but other wounds were discovered as Gypsy Gale lay quiet under his gentle manipulations, though they were none of them in vital spots.

A few minutes later the giant gambler rallied, sitting up without help, though his face looked more than ever like that of a man on whom the hand of death was resting.

"You see?" he muttered, with the ghost of a smile as he gazed up into those blue eyes. "It won't be such a mighty task after all. Time was—bah!" with an impatient outfling of a hand as he added: "I'm a sweet object for boasting—now!"

Without a word, Hart Oakes placed his revolver in the crippled gambler's lap. He brought his rifle and the belt of arms across and placed them on the further side of Gypsy Gale, who was watching him in puzzled silence. He moved back, sitting down and holding both hands behind his back as he uttered quietly:

"It's your play, pardner."

"What do you mean?"

"That I've got no use for my tools as long as you're too stubborn to see what's plainer than the nose on your face. That if you can't take the word of a white man—if you can't believe me when I say over and over again that I'm not one of your enemies; I've never tried to work you harm in word, thought or deed; I've not been hunting you down, nor do I know any reason why I should. I say, if you can't take my word for this, I'll be under no obligations to you. I can stand your lead, or your cold steel, but blessed if I'll stand any more of your insulting sneers and suspicions—that's flat!"

The last doubts of the hunted gambler were banished by this blunt proof of honesty, and there were unwonted tears in his eyes as he pushed the weapons toward the sport. And his voice was far from steady as he made reply:

"I ask your pardon, sir, for all I've said or done to—"

"That's white, and plenty enough, pardner," laughed Oakes, as he shuffled along until their hands met in a firm grasp. "It did cut me, I'll own up, for about all I've got to brag over is my word. When I give that, it's like an old maid giving her heart: all there is worth taking, but mighty earnest and honest what there is of it!"

"If you knew all I've suffered—"

"Never mention it, pardner! I'm not a mite curious, though I would like to know what in thunder is going on, anyway!" with a sudden explosion, in flat contradiction to his first words.

Gypsy Gale dropped his hands, his head bowing, his face averted, his giant frame shivering as with powerful emotion. Curiously, yet sympathetically, Hart Oakes watched him. Surely he must have suffered terribly to be so broken down!

As quickly as he had turned away, Gypsy Gale once more faced the man who had so strangely been thrown into his company.

"If you would listen—if I might confide in you, stranger!"

"Why not, pardner?" bluntly, yet with an undercurrent of real sympathy in his voice and looks. "I don't claim to be better than the general run, but I never went back on a man without he hit out first. And, somehow, my sympathies always did belong to the under dog in a fight!"

"Then, perhaps—but you shall hear my story first. Then—"

Something rose in his throat to choke him, and he looked so badly that Oakes involuntarily started forward to lend him support. But the refugee motioned him back, forcing a wan smile and huskily saying:

"No—I'm all right. I was only thinking of—my little girl!"

He brushed a hand across his face, then hastily added:

"You said you'd heard many stories about me. I don't wonder at that. I've led a strange life for the past few years, and sometimes I can hardly believe that I am not dreaming!"

"I'm a gambler, born and bred. My father was a gambler, and his fathers were gamesters before him. It runs in the blood, and I couldn't have followed any other life if I tried!"

"Put it thar, pardner!" nodded Oakes, extending his hand, with a low laugh and bright smile. "I've been there—and I'm there yet!"

Gypsy Gale answered the grip and smile, but there was little force in either. Just then he

felt little pride in his profession. Why should he? What had it brought upon him? Ruin—and worse!

"There was a time when I thought I could break away from cards," he said, his brows contracting as with mental pain. "I did, for a time, but then—bah!" forcing a harsh laugh as his hand swung out impatiently. "I'll not go back so far—I must not, or I'll never say what I thought I'd tell you. There are some things—"

"I've heard of 'em, I reckon," said Oakes, thinking only how to relieve the troubled gambler. "I've heard how you raked in pretty much all Silver Lode, leaving out the live stock, of course! And it was your big luck that set my face in this direction. Why couldn't I be the one to cut your comb? Every dog has its day, you know, pardner."

"There's such a thing as being *too* lucky," frowned Gale. "And you've heard of giving a dog a bad name when you want to hang him. You say you're a professional; then you must know how easy it is for a sport to get a black mark against him."

"Men will lose, and men will kick, pardner."

"If they do no worse than kick! But listen, and I'll tell you the truth about my career in Silver Lode.

"I struck it nearly two years ago, for the first time. The camp was hardly developed, then, but it was promising enough, and I had more faith in its future than one-half of those who put their good money into the speculation.

"I did not set up a house, I never felt any temptation that way, though, as a rule, it is the only road to wealth for men of our class."

"Better pay, but lots of responsibility, wear and tear of mind and nerves! Good for ducats, but mighty poor for fun! Excuse me! I didn't mean to chip in quite so soon. Let her roll, pardner!"

"I've always been one of the rare exceptions to the rule. From start to finish luck stuck close by me. And after I located in Silver Lode, nearly everything to which I laid my hand turned out big money. The greater part was pure luck, but—well, you know how it goes with men of our profession.

"While playing with white men I kept strictly on the square, and let luck have full swing, but whenever a hawk ruffed up at me, I tried to give as good as they sent, adding as much interest as possible."

"Of course. Don't I know how the old thing works?" coolly commented Oakes, with a short nod of approval.

"For nearly a year I got along smoothly enough. If I won, it was only the fit reward of luck, skill and nerve combined. But then the water began to grow disagreeably warm. There were no open charges, you want to know; those could be met and wiped out too easy! But I began to feel the cold shoulder from many whom I had befriended as best I knew how. Ugly rumors went floating about, set going none could or would tell how. And only for an obstinate streak in my disposition, I would have shaken the town long ago, for I had enough and to spare."

"You wouldn't drive, and I don't blame you, pardner!"

"Better if I had—a million times better, even though I had sacrificed every dollar in the world!" groaned Gypsy Gale, bowing his head and covering his face with hands that trembled perceptibly.

Hart Oakes said nothing. He simply reached out a hand and gently patted those bent shoulders in silent sympathy. Nor could he have taken a wiser course, for the giant gambler quickly rallied, smiling faintly into that handsome face, then, staring intently at the further wall of the canyon, he resumed his story:

"There was only one man in Silver Lode whose kick and skill combined proved anything equal to that which attended me. His name was Todd Undermill."

Hart Oakes gave a little start at the name, but concealed this as well as he could by pretending to alter his position. Todd Undermill! The name of the man whom Gypsy Gale was accused of murdering!

"You've heard something about it, then?" asked the gambler.

In a few words Oakes explained where and under what circumstances the name had come to his ears. Gypsy Gale frowned darkly, but made no comment on the fact. After a brief pause he resumed:

"This man owned a claim which he was having developed enough to prove that it was what he declared: the richest strike since Silver Lode was first located. And he was right, too! I satisfied myself of this. I carefully investigated the claim, until I became confident that the owner of the Cap-sheaf need never trouble himself about the future, so far as money was concerned."

"I tried to buy Undermill out, but he would not sell, though I offered him his own figures. He said he would prove all he claimed, then go back home and sell to a company, retiring from work for the rest of his life. Curse the mine!" with sudden fierceness. "Why did I ever hear of it? Why did I ever covet the hole?"

"Mighty natural, I should say!" murmured Oakes, softly.

"I did covet it, and I swore that I would become the sole owner of it if man could bring about the end. But—as high Heaven hears me!" with trembling right hand uplifted in unison with his sunken eyes, "I would never stoop to crime even to keep that vow!"

The last lingering doubt vanished. Only a relentless enemy could have doubted his perfect truth just then, and Hart Oakes was no enemy. Instead, he began to feel a sympathy as deep as was his interest in this hunted giant.

His firm hand-grip said as much, though his lips were silent. And that honest touch seemed to strengthen the wounded man, for his tones were firmer, stronger, clearer as he resumed, speaking rapidly:

"Time and again I played with Undermill, sometimes winning, sometimes losing; but I could not get him to risk the Cap-sheaf, no matter how high ran his luck. Until—well, less than one week ago my time came 'round at last!

"They say he was drunk—too drunk to know what he was doing. That may be. I know he drank freely, but so he did every time he played. I did not urge him to drink, or even to stake his claim. I was tired of that. I felt that it would be useless. The offer came of his own free will. Of course I jumped at it. And—I won the Cap-sheaf!"

"He took the loss hard, they said. I never saw him afterwards. I had gained my ends, and was thinking of going to see—my little girl!"

"Then—last night—they tried to arrest me. Todd Undermill was dead—had blown his brains out! They called it murder, and—"

"Why didn't you face it out? Why run away?"

"They would have lynched me. And—I had more than life at stake when they came—I had to save my poor little girl!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE SPORT CALLS FOR A HAND.

A PUZZLED look came into the face of the Thoroughbred Sport, and strong as was his curiosity growing, it was mere through a wish to keep Gypsy Gale from relapsing into his moody, brooding condition that led him to mutter aloud:

"It's by me, pardner. I can't see anything to make it on."

With a strong effort the Big Bracer choked back the emotion which bade fair to overpower him, and forced a brief return of that flickering smile as though he caught the hidden meaning of his companion.

"I was thinking of my daughter, and of what I learned only a little while before those devils came howling for my blood!"

Oakes was thoroughly surprised, and showed it in face and voice.

"What! you didn't have a chill with you at Silver Lode? They surely didn't—beg pardon, mate; it wasn't my put!"

"No, my little girl was not there—then," with a curious gulp as he added the word, but quickly regaining his former self-control. "Let me tell you the rest. Let me show you why I know I'm the victim of a cowardly plot, hatched by as foul a villain as ever disgraced the footstool!"

"Leaving out my last big winning—the Cap-sheaf—I had picked up enough property in and around Silver Lode to make me a mighty rich man, all told. I never figured it all up, with anything like closeness. That would not be so easy, seeing that for the most part it comprised mines and claims only partly developed, at the best. But I know that, counting in the Cap-sheaf, within a year I could sell out for enough to make me a millionaire, ten times over!"

"Who says there isn't money in the papers?" ejaculated Oakes, with a prolonged whistle of surprise.

Much as he had gathered concerning the master's luck of this being, before making up his mind to see how deeply he could cut into it with his own good fortune, he had never dreamed of anything like this.

Gypsy Gale laughed, short, hard, almost viciously. He held out his hands, curling a lip at their unsteadiness. He straightened his bent figure, to catch his breath with a choking gasp as that frightful pain spread through his entire person.

"You see—what it has brought—this mighty luck?" he panted in fierce hopelessness. "I'd give it all—I'd add my winnings from now until death—just for one week of life and strength—for a chance to save her—and foil that devilish schemer."

Oakes made a move as though to lend him support, but was checked by the Big Bracer, his gesture almost savage as he grated:

"I'll fight it out—I must fight it out, I tell you! If I was to give way now—I'd weaken like a kid in trouble! It isn't my nerve; that's strong enough; but this internal gnawing at my heart!"

With a feeling of almost awe, the sport watched him stagger to his feet, steady him-

self for a moment by a hand against the rocks, then limp slowly down to the edge of the water, With a new fear lest the wounded refugee should fall into that rushing current, Hart gained his side, deftly scooping up the needed drink in his hollowed palm.

Then, when Gypsy Gale shook his head in refusal of more, Oakes aided the crippled giant back to his former position.

Whether it was the cool water, the stern exertion of will, or this silent sympathy, matters not now. Enough that Gypsy Gale seemed much the better after he regained his seat, and his tones were stronger and evener than any time before.

"You're white, pardner—white clean through," he said, giving the sport's hand a parting grip that caused the bones to crack. "You treat me like a man, though for a bit it was a toss-up whether I'd shove you back into the drink or slit your throat."

"That's past and gone. You didn't know me then, you see," with a careless laugh that was meant to show how lightly he estimated past troubles, and thus indirectly reassure the giant gambler.

Gypsy Gale gazed keenly, wistfully into the handsome face of the careless speaker, trying to read what lay below the surface.

Could he trust this stranger? Dare he confide in him?

Even as he mentally asked himself these questions, they were self-answered by one of those horrible pangs at his heart.

"I must!" he gasped, pressing a hand to his wound with savage force, as though he hoped to kill the pang by suffocation. "There's none other!"

He believed himself good enough surgeon to know that his hour had almost struck. He felt that the grip of death was tightening upon his heart, and that his next flight would be into the unknown!

Hart Oakes divined something of this, and though he could not even guess all that such an act would cost him, his frank sympathy broke out in blunt speech:

"Look here, pardner, I'm no angel. I reckon you know such have little business in our profession; but since I've got no one near enough to go my bail, let me talk a bit on my own hook. I'm no angel. I've got some few black spots in my past, maybe. But I claim to be a white man, and about as square as the average run of our sex.

"You're in some sore trouble, that cuts deeper than your own skin. I'm not asking what that trouble is through pure curiosity, mind you. I don't want to pry into your secrets, or find out one whit more than you are perfectly willing I should master. You *sabe*, pard?"

Gypsy Gale nodded, shortly. There was a lighter shade in his face, and he plainly felt more confidence in the blunt speaker.

"I know. I've got my brain pretty clear again, and I used to count myself a fair judge of human nature."

"It runs with the papers, pardner," laughed Oakes. "One of our guild might as well be without nails on his fingers as lacking in that quarter. Why—

"I've got to leave her—my poor little kid!" muttered the Big Bracer, once more forgetting all else in that one bitter reflection. "What'll be her fate, now there's no daddy to wall her in with his love and watchfulness and his strong arms? What-hell's blackest curses on the evil brain that plots against her! May the hand rot by inches that crippled me like this! And just when I needed all my strength, my nerve, my wits and energies to— Olly! my poor, lost child!"

How terribly the once proud, strong, self-reliant man was broken down by all he had suffered, in body and mind, may be imagined from his utter helplessness now—by his choking sobs, and the hot tears that trickled through his trembling fingers as his bare head bowed again.

Hart Oakes kept his seat, though it was no easy task. Something told him that these tears would serve to relieve that overtired brain, and that the Big Bracer would be all the better for them in the end. And yet—how weak, how completely broken down he was!

Could he long withstand this terrible torture of mind, in addition to his bodily injuries? Those sobs, half-smothered by his still struggling will, seemed to shake his entire being. What if they should wear him out? What if he were to die without telling all his story?

It was this reflection that led Hart Oakes to speak sooner than he otherwise would have deemed wisest.

"I wasn't through with my chipping, pardner, when you called a rest, a bit ago. I thought it best to kind o' name my system, so to speak, before getting down to sober placing; but we'll call that done.

"If you had a full deck to pick from, I'd never shove myself into your hand, but as you haven't—well, a poor hand is better than none when the pot's full to running over, and there's a mighty sight in bold bluffing!"

"Such as I am, you can count on me until the game's run out or I'm bunched with the dis-

The Thoroughbred Sport.

cards. If you've got to lay up for repairs, and I'm free to confess that it looks mighty like that way, just now, and you can't send me to find a better substitute, shove me your hand and I'll play it for all it's worth, no matter who or how many's on the other side of the deck. How say? Is it a whack, pardner?"

Gypsy Gale lifted his head and gazed intently into that frank countenance for a few seconds, his sunken eyes glowing through the unsbed tears. He saw nothing but sincerity in that face, and once more the hands of the pair joined together in an earnest grip.

"I'll trust you, pardner!" the Big Bracer said, his voice husky and uncertain with strong emotion. "I wanted to do it, first off, but—when I've told you all, then you'll see why I hesitated."

"I wouldn't press you, just now, mate, only—"

Oakes hesitated to complete the sentence, but he need not have been so particular. Gypsy Gale read his unfinished meaning, and a grim smile curled his lips as he added:

"The deal is about ended, you mean? I know that, but I'll live long enough to show you how we can catch the last turn on Judd Varley—Satan make his bed!"

"Amen! though I don't know him from a hole in the ground," heartily commented the Thoroughbred Sport. "And the little combination?"

Gypsy Gale clasped his throbbing temples with both hands so tightly that his sinewy fingers turned white to the nails. Then he spoke rapidly, clearly, earnestly:

"I said there was one time when I thought I could and would shake the papers for good. That was when I got married. Don't judge me by what you see now, pardner! Time was—but let that slide now. She's gone—but little Olly is left!"

"When she died, she begged me to bring up the baby as a lady, and not to let her ever know how I made a living, if I could help it. That was the first time I ever heard even a hint from her pure loving lips against my mode of life! And she said it only because of the baby."

"Don't I know?" softly murmured Oakes, his lids drooping for an instant. "I had a good mother—once! Go on, pardner."

"I couldn't shake the game, though I tried hard enough. It was born in me, I reckon. And then—well, I kept my promise to the little wife. I never let Olly even suspect that I was a professional sport. I put her in good hands until she was old enough to go to school, then made sure she was more than comfortable.

"I visited her every year, at least once, and if I had to lie to her when she talked about my business, I thought it was all for her own good—and so it was!" with a sudden frown. "Would it have bettered matters had I owned up to being a sport? Would it have saved her from falling into that demon's clutches?"

"He hasn't got her yet, pardner. Maybe he never will, if you let me have time to glance over the cue-cards," quietly said Oakes.

"It's hard switching off, mate," muttered Gypsy Gale, sternly winking back the hot tears that started afresh at the thoughts of his idolized daughter. "I know I'm wasting precious time, for if you're to save her from this devilish snare, you've got to get out of this before the bloodhounds track me this far—as they will!" with a fiery glance toward the opposite escarpment. "I know it—I can feel them drawing nearer and nearer every minute!"

"And this trap, pardner?" gently hinted Oakes, fearing his wits were beginning to wander again. "Judd Varley set it, you say?"

"Curse him—yes! Judd Varley—mark the name in letters of blood across your brain, pardner, Mark it down deep! And swear that you'll wipe it out with his black heart for a brush—swear it!"

"It's my life or his, pardner," was the cool, quiet response.

That resolute terseness served to calm the wounded refugee far better than the fiercest protestations, and in a more natural tone of voice he added:

"I was too lucky. I was getting too rich. They couldn't strip me by cards, fair or foul, and so they went deeper. I suspected something long ago, but felt that I could hold up my end against them all. But then—only yesterday, it was!—I found an open letter, addressed to me, and written by Olly, but which had never reached me before that. And in it she said that she was—"

The Big Bracer half started to his feet with a gasping moan, only to fall heavily backward, his uplifted hand quivering sharply!

The report of a pistol or rifle, partly smothered by the roaring of the river came down from the rocks beyond and above, only too plainly telling Hart Oakes that the enemy had come at last!

exultant shout, and as Hart Oakes caught up his rifle and sprung out in front of the fallen refugee, he caught sight of a rough-clad man among the rocks, swinging his hat over his head as he gave vent to his evil joy.

Swift as thought the rifle rose, and before the startled assassin could more than realize his peril the weapon spoke—and the Big Bracer was avenged!

His yell of mingled alarm and fear was cut short by the unerring lead, and wheeling half-around, he tossed aloft his arms and pitched forward on his face. His feet showed over the edge of the wall, but as Hart Oakes peered through the blue smoke, he saw that they were motionless, and a hard, grim laugh parted his lips as he dropped the rifle and caught hold of Gypsy Gale, dragging him back into the little recess, out of sight from the rocks above.

"If he was alone—who knows?"

A keen glance showed the sport that he was hidden from view of any person who might look down from the rocks, and then he bent over the Big Bracer, though he had not even the ghost of a hope that he yet lived.

He saw the red blood trickling down over the face as Gypsy Gale lay on his left side, and at first glance the missile seemed to have squarely pierced his skull. But—a low, shivering moan broke from the giant gambler's lips, and with his heart almost stilled in its pulsations, Oakes swiftly brushed away the fresh blood with one hand.

The result electrified him. The bullet had not entered the skull!

"Only a crease!" he gasped, scarce able to believe his eyesight.

Without a thought of his own possible peril, he sprung out on the ledge and dipped his kerchief into the cold water, hurrying back to bathe the face of the unconscious man. Unconscious, but still living!

For Gypsy Gale moaned again—then his eyelids fluttered—and a moment later he tried to arise.

"Take it easy, pardner!" muttered Oakes, gently but firmly pressing the refugee back. "You've got another ugly rap, and you'll want some little time to think it all over before you can get up and dance juba—yes, you do, now!"

"They've tracked me—and you still here!" groaned the Big Bracer, shivering in agony of mind far more than body.

"But if they don't know it! I only saw one rascal, and I knocked him endways too quick for talking! They can't see us in here. What's to hinder us from laying low until dark comes—eh?"

Oakes spoke far more cheerfully than he felt at heart, but he had not yet gained all the information he would need to enable him to make his vow good, and he knew that Gypsy Gale needed all his strength.

A slight shiver ran over him as he cast a side-long glance at the roaring, tumbling waters, in which he had so nearly met his death on the night last past. How could he hope to escape from that trap other than by trusting his person to that rushing torrent?

"You are sure? You are not simply trying to brace me up?" doubtfully murmured Gypsy Gale, gazing wistfully into that pale, handsome countenance. "Not for my own sake—I'm thinking of Olly—of my poor, defenseless, betrayed little girl!"

"It's white, and straight as a string, pardner," earnestly responded Oakes, stopping short as there came floating down to their ears loud cries, mingled with oaths and curses of angry revenge.

"If it's him!" panted Gale, lifting his body to a sitting posture and stretching a hand out toward his rifle which leaned against the back of the niche. "If it's only Judd Varley!"

Oakes gripped him with a restraining hand, else the crazed gambler would have crept out in full view, thinking only of vengeance on his bitterest enemy.

"Lay low, pardner—for Olly's sake!" he muttered sharply.

That name was all-powerful. Gypsy Gale yielded, though his sunken orbs glowed like coals of living fire, and his strong teeth grated audibly, even above the roaring of the river beyond.

Cautiously Hart Oakes stole a peep from close beside the curving edge of the niche in which they lay hidden. He caught a glimpse of several men on the canyon wall above, near where the fallen assassin lay in death, plainly greatly excited, but just as clearly at a loss to solve the riddle.

How had their fellow come by his death? Surely he had uttered a yell of exultation after the shot—for, almost certainly the roaring between those rocky walls had drowned the second report, to them, at least. Yet he lay there dead with a hole between his eyes!

So much Hart Oakes saw, then drew back again, laughing softly.

"They'll never be wiser, unless we see fit to give 'em light, pardner! There's naught to draw their eyes this way, and if we lie snug as we can—we'll get there with both feet, yet!"

Gypsy Gale shook his head sadly.

"You, perhaps, but never me. It's too late to think of that. I've played my last hand—but what matter? If you'll only take it up and play the game out to a safe ending!"

"I've said I'd try my level prettiest, pardner," was the quiet response, but with a grim look settling about his lips as those angry yells broke out afresh. "But—if you can't jump the game, what show do I stand? We're in the same box, I reckon!"

Despite his grim manner of speaking, there was just the suspicion of despair in the tones of the sport. Not so strange, all things considered. Full of nerve, brave to the verge of recklessness as he had so recently shown himself, he had undergone enough to break down any ordinary man, twice over. And with that vicious shot to kill, without the least warning; with those fierce, bloodthirsty yells still echoing through the canyon; with only that mad torrent open as an avenue of escape; why should he not begin to despair?

But as he caught the shade, Gypsy Gale broke out savagely:

"You're a man; you're sound in wind and limb, and you've sworn to save my little girl. You must escape, and—"

Fiercer yet came those mad cries from the opposite bluff, and Hart Oakes shrugged his shoulders significantly as Gypsy Gale paused short.

"I'll do all I know how, pardner; but if those gentlemen object to my taking a walk? If they say not, what good will my saying yes be?"

"They don't know we're hidden here, you said?"

"I'm open to bet odds on that," was the prompt response. "If they had smoked us, wouldn't they be flinging their cards down at us, or at our front door anyway?"

The Big Bracer made no immediate response. He sunk his face in his hands, seemingly trying to solve the important enigma. There must be some method of escape. She must be saved before entering the snare!

Cautiously, knowing that espial meant a swift volley of lead, Hart Oakes stole another peep at the enemy on the rocks above.

They were still gathered about the corpse, though its feet were no longer visible. He could just catch a glimpse of a bowed back, as though some one was bending over the dead man, trying to find out how he came by his doom. And the thought sent a startled glow into his eyes as he drew back his head.

"If they're not fools—if they note that the lead must have come from below," he muttered, below his breath. "I'd give a penny just for one squint, to see what sort of a hole my bullet left behind it."

Another yell, different from any which had gone before it, came floating down the canyon, and hastily peering forth again, Oakes frowned blackly as he saw that his new-born fears were not wholly without foundation. Half a dozen men were lined along the escarpment, looking downward, as if in search of the dead shot.

"They've hit it, first clatter!" he grated, stepping back, with an ugly frown contracting his brows. "It's coming on us all in a heap, pardner," turning toward the Big Bracer.

"They've found us out?"

"Part way—worse luck. They looked to see how the rascal was hit, and no doubt the hole guided them. They're trying to spot our hiding-place right now."

"Let them look," frowned Gale, shortly. "They can't hit us from up there, and if they try to come along the trail I followed to reach this hole, we can hold them at bay until dark."

"And when dark comes?"

"You've got to escape, for Olly's sake. You've got to scale the rocks or else creep down the river trail until at a safer point. You gave your word; I hold you to it. If I thought—"

"Don't say it, pardner," coldly interposed the sport, with a frown. "I said I'd back your little game until the lights were put out. That is all a man can ask, even if he is crazy."

Gypsy Gale lowered his burning gaze, but made no reply. Oakes sat silent, frowning darkly, as well he might. Not even when a rifle-shot, quickly followed by others, came echoing through the rocky passage, did he move. Only when a bullet flattened against the wall, not two feet from his head, the bits of lead spattering sharply against his cheek, did he break the silence.

"They're probing for us, pardner, and I reckon they'll narrow the thing down until they make us kick back again, in the end. And so isn't there a little more light to throw on this game of theirs? If I should happen to slip through their grip—"

"You must—what is to come of Olly if you fail, as I have failed? Swear that you will escape—as a dead man and father I beg of you!"

"I'll do my level best. No man can say more than that."

Another bullet came to flatten with an ugly sound, but neither man moved for it. As yet they were only suspected, and no bullet could fairly reach them from the bluff beyond.

"I found that letter, as I told you," hurriedly spoke Gale. "It was from Olly, and claimed to be an answer to one I had written her, beg-

CHAPTER XVI.

IN A LIVING TOMB.

"CALLED the turn, fu'st clatter, or I'm a bowlin' liar!"

"Down the canyon brink came the viciously—

ging her to come as quickly as possible to Silver Lode!

"It stunned me, first off, for I had never sent her any such letter—had never mailed her a letter from Silver Lode, in fact, lest somehow she learn something of my real life. I've kept her in ignorance until now—I hoped to keep her thus until the end! I'd rather lose my right hand than to have her even suspect how I get the money which I have showered in her lap!"

"And she wrote that she was coming?"

"At once, she said, but I hoped to intercept and turn back with her before she could fall into the snare," with a bitter groan at his helplessness. "I could have done it, only—they've riddled me with their lead until I'm crippled—crippled and dying!"

He sunk back with an anguished moan, hiding his face from view, even in his pitiable condition loth to let another gaze upon his tear-dampened face. Oakes said nothing. He had learned enough, with his keen wits to join the fragments, to pretty clearly comprehend the game Judd Varley and his allies were trying to play to success. And if this passionate outburst of grief would only end in sleep!

"If he don't get some rest, he'll go clean crazy—dead sure!" he mentally decided; and it was more in hopes of bringing the former about than through any idea of sleeping himself that he finally uttered:

"We can't do anything until they pull out, or night comes, pardner. What's the matter with our trying to get a little sleep? For one, I'm clean tuckered. And then—I'm dead sure to dream of eating a whole barbecue! Maybe that will help fill my belt out a little!"

With a yawn that was only half counterfeit he lay down on the hard rocks, curled up and closed his eyes, hoping his actions would prove infectious, and lead to Gypsy Gale's taking the rest he needed.

Within five minutes he was sleeping soundly as a well-fed babe, and he was only aroused by a sharp explosion near by, starting up to see Gypsy Gale standing out on the ledge, sending shot after shot up at the enemy on the canyon wall!

And as he stared in sleepy anger, he caught the exultant words:

"Run to earth at last, Big Bracer! Into your hole, dog, murderer! For I swear that shall prove your tomb!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BIG BRACER'S BEQUEST.

An inarticulate cry of mingled anger and disgust broke from the lips of the Thoroughbred Sport as he awoke to witness this mad action on the part of the giant gambler, and expecting no less than to see him drop in his tracks, a riddled corpse, he sprung to his feet.

But the sound of his awaking had not escaped the Big Bracer, and with marvelous celerity in one so sorely injured, he wheeled and hobbled back, the smoking rifle held as a barrier before him while he hurriedly muttered:

"Back—you! Keep out o' sight—they don't even suspect I'm not all alone, and—"

Something of his old powers seemed to have returned for the moment, for with the rifle crossing his breast, the sport was shoved back into the niche almost before he could realize what was happening.

"Hide—they'll never know—they'll be content with one, never thinking the Big Bracer had a double born to him while they hunted him down like a blind, staggering mad dog! Hide—lie snug and close and never even chirp, while—they'll never think—why should they think? That devil! I'm the only one he has to fear! And if he sees me fall—if he knows—"

A cold shiver ran over the sport as he listened, as he gazed into those vividly-glowing eyes, deep sunken back in their sockets. He saw that Gypsy Gale was indeed crazed: was it only temporarily, or was it for all time? Could he break the spell, or would only the finger of death do that?

His hands went out and closed on the shoulders of the giant gambler, not violently, yet in readiness to exert force should that become a necessity. His eyes sought to fix and hold that glowing, flaming pair of orbs, and he spoke with as much sharpness as he dared at the time:

"I'll lay low if you will. If you play an open hand, I'm going to face my cards the same way. It's your say-so, pardner!"

He threw all the power possible into his gaze, trying to subdue the madness which he saw—or fancied—in those sunken eyes.

"They don't know—if they get me, you're all right!"

"And Olly—think of Olly!"

Gypsy Gale flinched at the sound of that name, and realizing his advantage, Oakes pressed it as he best knew how.

"Think of Olly, man! What'd she say if she knew you were throwing away your life—the life of her father! Think of Olly, and—"

"I was—I am!" muttered the giant gambler, his muscles relaxing and the rifle dropping between them. "I thought that I'd insure your escape by letting them see—"

In swift succession several bullets came spat-

ting against the rock just back of them, and down from the canyon wall floated the cry:

"Show up, you big duffer! Or—shall I drop in to see you?"

The sound of that voice, indistinct though it was, seemed to act like magic on the giant gambler. The wild, insane light in his eyes turned to a steady glow, and his face hardened until it might have been a mask of bronze.

"I've got to answer him, or he'll reckon all's over save crowing, pardner," he uttered, more like his former self. "Keep covered, you; I'll only show 'em I'm still in the ring."

Snatching up the rifle Gypsy Gale thrust its muzzle out of the niche and sent a couple of shots toward the canyon brink, answered by mocking, jeering shouts. Hart Oakes stood ready to grasp him in case he should venture too far, but his services were not needed. Only stopping to send a shout of grim defiance toward his foemen, the Big Bracer sunk back on the rocks, pale, panting, drops of torture bedewing his brow.

Hart Oakes grimly watched him for a few moments in silence.

"It's past me! Case-keeper dead drunk, nary a cue-card, and dealer won't say whether it's first turn or half way to hock! That lets me out for this deal! Wake me, pardner, when the cloth's cleaned for a new put!"

Ending with a yawn of grim resignation, the sport seemed about to lie down and renew his broken nap, when Gypsy Gale checked him with:

"Maybe I was mad—haven't I undergone enough to turn any one brain upside down? And when I heard his voice—when I saw him standing out in fair sight—that head devil, Judd Varley—"

"You had to run out and tell him where you'd moved to, of course!"

That half-angry sneer still further calmed the refugee, and Hart Oakes felt just a trifle ashamed of his own tartness as he was calmly answered by the self-doomed fugitive:

"I was only part mad, partner, and I'm not so sure I wasn't acting all for the best, even yet. Why? Because I know my time's come. It's fate. I've got my death already. You know that. I saw it in your eyes when you first bent over me. But let that go."

"It's me Judd Varley is hunting. He don't know that I've found a partner, or that I'll leave one behind me to guard and save my little girl from his cursed tricks. And so—if he could see me die, he'd turn back, content that all was well. And—don't you see, man?" with nervous irritation as Oakes steadily watched him in silence. "That'd open the way for you, wouldn't it? You could wait until they were all gone, or until it was dark enough to cover your movements, and then—it was all for Olly—all for Olly!"

Gypsy Gale bowed his head, hid his face, covering his slow, scalding tears from view. And Hart Oakes, more powerfully affected than he had been for many a day, gently patted those bowed shoulders as he said:

"It isn't for me to fault you, pardner, since you thought it all for the best, but I'm glad I was in time to halt you in that. If death must come, wait for it. Don't rush to meet it half way. And—isn't there more I'd ought to know about your child? When do you look for her? Which way is she coming? Alone, or with a guardian? What am I to tell her? How is she to know I'm clean white?"

Once more the Big Bracer conquered his emotions, and once more he looked squarely into the anxious face of the Thoroughbred Sport.

"I wasn't so mad as you reckoned, pardner. While you slept, I finished what I had to say. You'll find it in your bosom, if you look."

With genuine surprise Hart Oakes snatched a strange note-book from his bosom, but Gypsy Gale checked his hand before he could open it.

"You'll find pretty much everything written down in there, pardner, but it can wait until there's more time. But for fear you might lose it in getting away, there's one or two things I'd best tell you by word of mouth."

"I'm all ears open, pardner," muttered Oakes, still frowning a bit, for he had ever prided himself on his alertness, and it disgusted him to think that any man could "paw him over" while he slept, without awaking him.

"Those devils hunted me mighty hard, last night, and more than once I thought I'd have to throw up my hand. Only thoughts of Olly kept me going, I reckon!" swallowing a lump that rose in his throat at the name and memory.

"Until I run across you, pardner, I thought I had only one friend in all this section—or two, at the outside, for I mustn't forget Molly. And it was in hopes of setting them on the lookout for my little girl that I fought back death until—until I got to the old hollow tree—and that was such a slim chance, too."

It was that terrible pain tearing his breast to shreds as it seemed, and even his marvelous will failed to immediately conquer it. In silence Oakes watched, knowing how utterly helpless he was to aid the sufferer in any way. In silence Gypsy Gale fought the battle, and won, though the victory left him ghastly pale, weak and trembling in every fiber, his face damp with icy sweat.

"More than a year ago—I was out bunting.

I found a man—an Indian—John Whisky, they call him. He lives a little ways below Silver Lode, with his squaw, Molly. Everybody knows him. And—he owes me a life—I killed the bear that had him foul, under the hollow old tree I spoke of. He's only an Injun, but—he's true as steel!"

"You want me to hunt him up and tell him something?"

Gypsy Gale nodded assent, one hand gripping his breast tightly, the suffocating pains once more overpowering his organs of speech.

"It's all right, pardner," soothingly uttered the sport, desirous of saving the poor wretch further torture. "I reckon I've got the run of the cards, at last. I'm to get away. I'm to stop your girl before Judd Varley can grip her. If I want help, John Whisky's my man."

Gypsy Gale nodded assent to all this, but he never gave over his desperate fight against what he felt was coming death. There was more to tell, before his ally was thoroughly armed. And in the end his parental love won the victory.

Not all at once. Time and again he had to break off speaking in order to choke down that awful gripping at his heart. But as often he took up the broken thread and doggedly stuck to his text until Hart Oakes knew all that was strictly essential to his future movements in this desperate game for big stakes.

The Big Bracer told how he had fought his way to the tree under which he found the Ute helpless under the paws of a wounded bear. He killed the beast, and secured a friend for life.

"We've often met at that spot, since then, and I hoped that, when I was lost sight of, John might go there to look for some sign. And so—I bid my money and papers—worth a fortune—in the hollow tree. Get them—for Olly!"

With another paroxysm making him shiver in every fiber, Gypsy Gale motioned for the note-book which Hart Oakes still held. Opening it, he took from it a loose leaf, covered with writing.

"For you—not pay, but—call it present!" he panted, the leaf rattling in his trembling fingers as he held it toward the sport.

In silence Oakes took it, rapidly glancing over the lines which Gypsy Gale had written during that brief nap of his, which was broken by the sound of rifle-shots, as detailed. To his amazement it made over to him the mine which had given an excuse for Judd Varley to spring his audacious plot—it purported to be a bill of sale of the Cap-sheaf Mine, dully described, for consideration received, with simply a blank left for the insertion of his name. Despite this omission, he could not avoid believing that it was meant for him.

"I didn't know—you never told me your name, pardner," said the Big Bracer, his tones growing steadier, that horrible pallor a little relieved as the pains died away. "I'll fill it in, now."

"But, pardner!" stammered Oakes, taken all aback.

"If you refuse, I'll think you're going back on—on Olly!" the giant gambler sharply frowned, his eyes beginning to glow again. "It's not pay for saving her. It's a check on Varley. If you should be too late to save her from falling into his hands, you could bother him with that—don't you see?"

"And save so much for Olly—is that it, pardner?" brightening up at this thought.

"No—for you—you'll win all the rest for her, man!" with a swift glow lighting up his face. "I feel it—I know it in my heart! You'll win the game—you'll clear my name in her sight, of all the foul lies they'll use to blacken it! And—to pay for your time and trouble and—pardner, say you'll take it as it's meant? I beg of you as a dying man, pardner!"

Though reluctantly—for from all he had heard, he knew the mine must be worth a fortune—the sport yielded. He dared no longer refuse, for he could see that terrible anxiety was surely harming the wounded man, whose case was already serious enough.

"All right, pardner," he said, slowly. "I'll look on this as your will. I'll do the best I know how to carry it out. And I'll consider you've bequeathed the little girl to my care, with it!"

He felt richly rewarded as he saw what an intense relief came into the baggad face and sunken eyes of the giant refugee as he made known this decision. Sinking back, closing his eyes, pale as a corpse, Gypsy Gale seemed on the point of passing away from earth. But the next moment he lifted his head sharply as a clear voice came down:

"I say, Big Bracer! Have you cashed in your checks yet?"

"It's that demon—it's Judd Varley!" he panted, hoarsely.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE REFUGEE'S DEFIAENCE.

HART OAKES had divined as much, and there was a dangerous glitter in his blue eyes as his right hand closed on the repeating rifle which

lay on the rocks between himself and the giant refugee.

"I'll answer the scoundrel, pardner!" he grimly muttered, but the Big Bracer caught his arm with a marvelously strong hand for a dying man, sharply crying:

"Are you going crazy, man? Would you throw away the only hope left for Olly? Would you show that devil in human shape the substitute I've found for the miserable wreck he's left in me?"

Hart Oakes slowly, reluctantly let the rifle touch the rocks again, a flush of half-shame tinging his cheeks under that fierce gaze.

"I forgot—when I remembered all that devil's done to you, pardner! Yes—you're right, I reckon. Let him yelp his throat sore if it likes him!"

"I would, only he'd send his whelps down to make sure of my death if he don't get his answer," grimly uttered Gypsy Gale, picking up the rifle and using it as an aid to regain his feet.

Hart Oakes caught him by the arm, quick as thought.

"Easy, pardner! You're not going—"

Gypsy Gale turned to meet his frowning gaze, smiling faintly.

"I'm not going to throw for suicide again, if that's what you mean, pardner; but—you hear?"

"Big Bracer, ahoy!" came floating down the river-bed. "Are you too thoroughly cowed to answer to your title? Has the shadow of the hangman's noose scared you to death?"

"He's only trying to get you into sight, so some of his cappers can pot you, pardner!" warningly muttered Oakes.

"I know, but I'll keep my eyes open. Better a little extra risk now, than take the chances of his finding out that I have a mate in the game!" quickly responded Gale, hobbling forward, pausing at the curving edge of the niche, thrusting the muzzle of his rifle into view as he shouted in tones strong and clear—so much so that Oakes felt no little marvel, and began to doubt whether Gale could be so badly hurt, after all!

"Hello to you, Judd Varley! If you reckon I'm dead or dying, why don't you come down and bid me farewell?"

"Reckon I will, if you can assure me it's really you that's talking, Gypsy!" came the mocking response, distinct enough despite the roar of the walled-in waters. "You know I never did fancy ghosts."

"I'll make one out of your dirty carcass, if you dare show your face from cover, craven!"

"Face your hand, and I'll string mine alongside, Gypsy! You've taken my word before this; take it now! Step out into the light of day, unless you fear to show the brand of Cain on your noble brow, and I'll do the same. Can I put it fairer?"

"Careful, pardner!" warningly uttered Oakes as he saw the refugee making a movement. "All he wants is a pot-shot at you, man!"

The Big Bracer, with a grim smile, glanced over his shoulder with a slight nod. The trick was entirely too thin, and he was on his guard.

Inch by inch he was scanning the brink above, as he slowly moved his head outward, hoping to catch a glimpse of his bitterest enemy in time to send a bullet searching for his life. But Judd Varley was too wary for that. And as though angered by the delay in answering his last taunt, he sharply shouted:

"Talk's cheap, but it won't buy chips, Gypsy! You're in a hole, and you'll never slip out of it with life! Why, you poor fool! If it wasn't that the boys have sworn to string you up a tree for murdering poor old Undermill, they'd riddle you this instant!"

"It's seeing before shooting, Varley!"

"Bah! they've got you lined with a dozen guns, right now! The rocks are full of them—a regular masked battery, Gypsy! If you can't swallow that—Let him have it, lads!"

Mingling with his last words came a rattling discharge of rifles and pistols, but the giant refugee drew quickly back, and only the rock was wounded by the spiteful missiles.

Then, with marvelous celerity for one so hurt and crippled, Gypsy Gale stepped out from cover, rifle at shoulder, his eyes keenly searching for a victim, believing that, in his eagerness to note the effect of that volley, Judd Varley would briefly expose himself to view.

He reasoned correctly, for he caught a glimpse of his hated foeman peering down the rift, and sent a bullet whistling in that direction. But on a fruitless mission. For, even as he pressed the trigger, he saw the wary scoundrel dodge swiftly back under cover.

An example which Gale instantly imitated, regaining the niche just in time to escape a couple of shots from above. And his voice rung out in a mocking, defiant peal of laughter as he cried aloud to his enemy:

"I showed my face, and it scared you into a fit, Judd Varley!"

"It's ugly enough for twice that, Gypsy!" came floating back.

"It's the face of a man, and the liar isn't born that'll ever say as much about yours, Varley! But talk is too hard work so far off. If you want to say anything more, come down

here. The latch-string's out, and I'm ready to entertain callers—even such miserable curs as you!"

"Maybe I will—but later, Gypsy. Just now I've got sweeter business on hand. I've got an appointment with a young lady—fair and rare and sweet as a posy in May, Gypsy!—named Olive Tempest!"

The refugee visibly staggered at this, and there was an awful expression on his baggard face and in his hollow eyes as he turned to the young sport, thrusting out the rifle, huskily gasping:

"Take it—hold me—I'll have to face him if you—"

Seeing how surely that malicious shaft had sped home, Oakes caught the wretched father in his arms, gently lowering him to the rocks, holding him firmly yet tenderly, knowing that if more came he would be mad enough to throw away his life in the vain attempt to still those foul and malicious lips. And beyond a doubt he would have had to exert actual force, only for the fact that, overcome by his exertions, Gypsy Gale fainted, probably for the first time in all his life.

For Judd Varley did not stop with what has been recorded. Still hoping to madden the father into rushing forth from cover, he sent down his vile taunts, one after another, sparing nothing which he fancied might gain his devilish ends.

They can find no record here. They proved the speaker to be beyond the pale of humanity, and as he listened, it was all Hart Oakes could do to refrain from snatching up the rifle and leaping forth in hopes of stilling that foul tongue for all time.

But he managed to contain himself, doubly thankful for the stupor which dulled the senses of the giant refugee. Then, fearful lest Judd Varley might suspect Gypsy Gale had died of his former hurts, he cried aloud, copying the deep tones of the gambler as well as he could, knowing that the roaring waters would cover any difference.

"Keep on, if you think there's no hereafter, Judd Varley! Each word you utter is another nail in your coffin!"

"Your fist will never clinch them, Gypsy!"

"Come and whisper as much in my ear, won't you? Now—I'm done with talk. Actions are good enough for me."

For a little while longer Varley kept up his foul taunts, but as no answer came, and as he had no good reasons for thinking that grim defiance had come from other than the lips of the Big Bracer, he ceased, to concoct some more profitable scheme.

"Thank the Lord for so much, anyway!" muttered Oakes, with a breath of relief as he saw the refugee show signs of recovering his senses. "I couldn't have kept him in, short of tying him neck and heels, while that foul-mouthed cur was pouring out his filth. Now—how goes it?"

Gypsy Gale forced a wan smile as he opened his eyes to see that frank, kindly face bending over him solicitously. He pushed back the hands which offered to lift him to a sitting posture, saying:

"Let me—so!" with a short, grim laugh as he raised himself, showing an actual increase of strength, even so soon.

"I can't understand it, pardner!" and Oakes shook his head in wonder, not untinged with awe. "You've got it bad enough to lay out half a dozen strong men, and yet—I say, pardner!" with a forced smile on his pale face. "You don't tote a cast-iron interior about with you?"

Gypsy Gale shook his head, his face shadowing afresh.

"No—it's gone clean through the hollow, pardner, and it'll put my light out before long."

"I know better, old fellow," was the cheery retort. "You're growing stronger with every hour. By dusk you'll be as good as ever. And when that comes, we'll skin out o' this hole some way. We'll fool that rascal up yonder, and pull Olly out of the fire, too quick!"

"I wish I could think it—it would be a taste of heaven after an eternity of hell!" moodily muttered the gambler. "But I know better than to hope it. It's fate—and the instant I found that stolen letter from Olly, I knew that it meant my death. It's fate, pardner. And what is to be, will be."

"When it comes, I'll try to believe it, but not until then. Now—that fellow mentioned the name of Olive Tempest?"

"That's Olly, you know, mate," with a faint smile. "I told you I tried all I knew to keep my real life from her. The better to do that, I took another form of my name: turned Tempest into Gale. My rightful name is Stuart Tempest. Hers is Olive Tempest. Don't forget that, for it's the name she'll travel by, and there mustn't be any mistake made by you."

"If I didn't know and feel that so strongly, pardner, I'd be coaxing you to lie down and try to catch a nap. And Olly—she's a little girl, I think you said?"

"Little? I always think of her as little, but—she's now about nineteen years old," musingly muttered the refugee.

Hart Oakes gave a start, his eyes opening wide. Nineteen! And he had never thought of her as other than a mere child! Nineteen! A young lady—and bequeathed to his sole care and guardianship!

"Pard, you've got to get out of this with me," he muttered, his face hardening, his eyes growing graver than was their wont. "I'll back your game until my light is put out, but I can't play a lone hand with—a young lady! Why, pardner, she wouldn't *loo!* at me, let alone come under my wing just on an empty say-so from a clean stranger! You've got to make the rifle, if I have to swim with you sitting on my back!"

"I'll never leave this hole alive, I tell you!" with a frown. "I've got my billet, and you'll have time to shove me into the drink before it's time to strike out. And before then—listen, pard," his tones softening as he added: "I've made it as smooth sailing for you as I knew how. I've written to Olly—it's in that note-book, mind. I've told her to put her trust in you, and to follow your advice just as she would follow mine if I were near enough to give it."

Hart Oakes said nothing in response. Somehow he felt a strange dread—he could find no better term—of this young ward, so curiously placed under his protection. And yet—people had always considered him something of "a lady's man!"

"As near as I could calculate, from the date of her letter, and the distance she will have to come, Olly will most likely be on to-morrow's stage. I don't think she can get here sooner, and if so, and you get clear to-night, as you must, you can meet her far enough from Silver Lode to give Judd Varley and his gang the shake!"

"I'll do my prettiest, parduer," said the subdued sport, quietly, though the uneasy light still shone in his big blue eyes. "But I'm not giving up my notion of taking you along with me. If I have to make the rifle alone, I'll cash in before harm comes to her. If she comes ahead of your calculations, though?"

"Fight for her as you would want a white man to fight the battles of your own flesh and blood if they were in trouble!" flashed Gale, his eyes aglow. "Kill Judd Varley, and tell my story as your excuse. Snatch my poor child from his foul grip, and—and—"

Once more his voice was choked by that frightful agony. Once more he fought with grim death, his face dampening, his muscles rigid, his sunken eyes seeming to glaze over with a film.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN AWFUL EXPERIENCE.

LITERALLY helpless, unable even to give the sufferer a sup of the cold water running so freely just beyond reach of his hand, Hart Oakes sat watching the wounded gambler, fighting back death as few men have fought it before.

With each attack the paroxysms appeared to grow worse, until it was little short of a miracle that even his iron will had not long since given way for all. It could not have been because he still hoped to escape. There had been nothing like pretense in his declared fatalism. He felt that his wounds would surely slay him, and he never expected to leave that niche in this life.

As far as possible, he had guarded against the evil plots of his arch enemy. He had done more to insure the safety and escape of his strangely-met substitute than any other man out of a thousand, even though there was a fierce thirst for vengeance mingling with his bold offer of his own life to the enemy.

"If he only had proper care—if he was where he could be nursed and watched over!" muttered Oakes, his own face almost as pale and haggard as that of the sufferer beside whom he was watching.

Little by little Gypsy Gale won the victory, temporary though it doubtless was. His rigid arm relaxed. His blood-stained hand slowly fell away from his breast. His lids closed, and a full, long breath filled his lungs for the first time in many moments.

"You're easier, pard?" murmured Oakes, bending nearer, fearful that the anticipated end had at last come. "You can hear me talk?"

A faint smile lit up the ghastly face as the sport gently, softly wiped his sweat bedewed brow, and those dark eyes opened feebly. And yet his voice did not sound altogether like that of a dying man as he said:

"Why not, pardner? You've got a voice—what a corker you'd be for the keno-wheel, if you ever fell so low!"

It was "the ruling passion," but Oakes could not even smile in return. He had been gazing into the face of grim death too long. And then this marvelous vitality partly stupefied him.

"It'll come—but not yet—not until I've told—"

"Wait until you're stronger. Try to catch a little nap. I know enough to play the game out, alone if I have to, but I want to take you along out o' this trap. I will, if you'll be guided by me a bit, too!"

Gypsy Gale shook his head in dissent.

"I wish you might, but that'll never be. I'll sleep, but first—your real name, pardner. And that bill of sale—better all in one hand. I'm good for that much!"

"Then you'll try to nap a bit?" persisted Oakes.

"Better—I'll do it. Give me the book—there's a pen—"

With a strange reluctance for which he could not fully account, since surely he need never make use of the document unless he saw fit, Oakes complied, fitting the little fountain pen in readiness for the hand of the owner. And he watched Gypsy Gale as he slowly but firmly and with undeniable legibility filled his name in the blank left for it when the note was first written.

"Good against law—and devil!" grimly smiled the Big Bracer as he gazed at his completed work.

No need for Oakes to ask the meaning of that sentence. Right well he knew those last words applied to Judd Varley.

"Now you'll try to get some rest, pardner?" he coaxingly asked, as he carefully secured the note-book and contents upon his person. "It's not much of a place for style, but with my extra duds I reckon we can manage to rig up a bunk that won't be quite so hard as this rock floor. Say you'll trust me on guard, and sleep as long as possible?"

Gypsy Gale nodded assent. Then, with a slight start he uttered:

"If it turns out to be—if I cash in, pardner, when I don't know it—promise me one thing?"

Oakes nodded promptly, unable to resist that strange eagerness.

"Make my carcass of some use! Fool that devil up yonder! Swear that you'll try it, if I croak before dark! Yell out or shoot until you know they're watching, then lift me up and shove me into the drink, like I was still living—like I was cheating 'em' even in death!"

With almost terrible earnestness he panted forth these words, and though he shivered from top to toe, Oakes bowed his head in assent.

"I'll do it just as you say, pardner—if I must."

"It's sworn to, remember, pardner!" smiled Gypsy Gale, as his head fell back and his eyes closed languidly. "Now I'll—good-night, pard'r!"

Was it sleep, or was it the calm approach of a merciful death?

Hart Oakes hardly dared ask himself this, just then. He took off his coat and gently slipped it under the head of the wounded man. He could do no more than that, without disturbing that—was it sleep?

"It looks mighty like the pure white article!" he muttered below his breath as he watched the giant. "If I didn't know he has been dying all day, I'd swear he was only a mighty tired out man! It gets me—gets me all to pieces!"

It was marvelous in his eyes, this great vitality. With his past experience in gun-shot wounds, Oakes knew that, in nineteen cases out of every twenty, a man struck so near the heart by a heavy bullet would have died without even a sound.

"And not one in a thousand could have traveled a mile after it! Yet—look at him! Five holes in his carcass, without counting that! Count up all he's done and suffered since, and then—look at him! Sleeping as sound and easy as a little baby in its mother's arms!"

More than ever at sea, Hart Oakes waited and watched, his strange vigil broken occasionally by shouts from the enemy above, or by a spiteful bullet spattering harmlessly against the rock.

At length one came closer and at a different angle from the rest, and Oakes picked up the Winchester, stealing a little forward, his eyes quickly resting on a blue curl of smoke further down the river, rising up the face of the canyon wall. One at least of the gang had managed to lower himself to a ledge or crevice several yards below the top, thinking from there to catch a view of the Big Bracer.

With a hard, merciless smile the sport waited and watched, rifle cocked and muzzle bearing on the covert, ready for a snap-shot in case nothing more sure was offered him. Then the head of a human being popped up in view, distinctly visible against the light rocks which formed a background, only to as swiftly drop out of sight again.

"That won't wash, pardner," grimly muttered the sport, never removing his keen gaze for an instant. "I want my money's worth when *And now I've got it!*"

Viciously the last words crossed his lips, blending with the sharp report of his rifle. Without looking, he felt the result of that quick aim. He knew his lead was not wasted, and he turned quickly toward the wounded gambler.

To his surprise, Gypsy Gale never stirred a muscle at the report, confined as it sounded in that little niche. He was soundly sleeping. His respiration was long, steady, wonderfully unlike that to be looked for in a man so sorely wounded.

Satisfied of this, Oakes looked toward the crevice beyond, a hard, bitter sneer curling his lips as he saw the bare head of a human being lying on the rock, and a tiny stream of some-

thing creeping down the whitened surface below it.

"It's a good sign enough. Long as it lays there they'll not need to ask if I'm here," he nodded, grimly resuming his former position.

A few savage curses and threats came to his ears from the enemy above, but Oakes only scowled in response. He was sleepy, sore all over, thirsty and hungry. Just then he felt that he didn't care how soon the gang came at him in a bunch.

But this was not to be. In a little while silence reigned above, and not another sound came to him during the remainder of that day.

All through those long hours Gypsy Gale slept, calmly, quietly as a wearied child. Oakes sat moodily watching over him, his brain busy with all that had happened since his first being baited by Bark Matson.

It was almost dusk down in that narrow channel when Gypsy Gale opened his eyes and lifted himself to a sitting posture, his muscles acting much more freely than at any time since Oakes met him. And his voice was wondrously strengthened, too, it seemed, for he spoke clearly and without apparent difficulty:

"It's mighty nigh time for your starting, pardner."

"When I go, you go with me, Gale."

The Big Bracer made no immediate response. He rose to his feet, drew in a long breath moving his arms and legs as though testing his powers. Even he seemed amazed by his marvelous improvement. But would it last? Would not that terrible agony again pull him down?

He felt it would, and said as much, but Oakes refused to listen. He declared that the worst was past, and that the improvement would not be checked by action; if anything, the thought of working for the good of his child would still further benefit him. And in the end Gypsy Gale seemed to fall in with this line of thought.

"Have it so, if you will, pardner," he said, with a long breath, his dark eyes glowing with what seemed renewed life. "But I can't try the climbing, as I reckoned you might when dark came to cover you. We'll have to crawl along the trail I came."

"Why not? You came that way. What's to hinder our going back?"

"I was desperate hurt. I was mad with thirst, besides. I wanted to get water, and then—well, it was like a wild beast creeping to his den!" moodily frowned the giant refugee.

He took a cautious glance along the opposite brink, but saw nothing to denote the presence of the enemy. And then, as the shadows deepened down in the canyon, he declared that they must make a move.

"It's like crawling through death, pardner!" he warned, earnestly. "A slip may tip you into the drink, and—but you know what that means, I reckon. And—we may run against those bloodhounds, trying the same trail! If we do—if anything happens to me—swear you'll try to slip out, clear, without trying to take pay on my account!"

Not until Oakes pledged himself would the Big Bracer move further. Then, saying that his knowledge of the perilous trail demanded it, he took the lead, closely followed by the younger man.

Though the sun had not long set it was dark as midnight down by the roaring waters, and eyesight was of little avail to the two men who slowly crept down the river. In one sense this was a blessing, for they could not see their peril. If they had, Oakes more than once felt, even their strong nerves must have failed them.

It was truly an awful experience, and more than once both were forced to pause to conquer the sickening dizziness born of those roaring, tumbling, swirling waters, which at times fairly lapped their limbs as they crept along the narrow trail.

But there was even worse in advance.

One of those sickening spells seized upon Oakes, and he paused, pressing his person tightly against the wall, shutting his eyes and straining every nerve to resist the mad impulse he felt to hurl himself into the water. And then—

A wild, piercing scream came to his ears from in front!

What had happened? From whose throat—God above! had Gypsy Gale slipped into that merciless torrent?

He tried to cry out to his comrade. He strove to utter his name. But the sounds which came from his dread-parched throat were too faint even to reach his own ears.

He tried to spring forward, but equally in vain. His strength seemed gone. And as that sickening qualm once more assailed him, Hart Oakes sunk flat on his face, trembling, quivering, wholly unmanned for the moment!

How long he laid thus, he could never have told, but it was hardly a minute before, with a desperate effort of will, he conquered that awful sickness, and forced himself to move forward, shouting out the name of the giant refugee.

Only the roaring of the swirling waters answered him. And as he hurried on, for the moment forgetful of his own peril, he met no living obstacle, he failed to find the being for

whom he sought. And then he knew the worst. Gypsy Gale had fallen into that frightful torrent!

CHAPTER XX.

STEALING A VOICE.

As the awful truth forced itself upon his reluctant mind, Hart Oakes again lay helpless, stunned for the moment by the knowledge that he was left alone in such a hideous trap, from which there seemed no escape save through daring the almost certain destruction lying in that rushing torrent.

Even yet he fought against the belief that his comrade was gone forever. Even now he tried to believe that Gale had simply distanced him during the interval of his helplessness. And acting on this wild chance, he lifted up his voice, shouting until the strain seemed to tear the skin off his throat.

As he listened, his heart gave a suffocating bound and his brain reeled like that of a drunken man. Surely that was a human voice? Surely Gale was answering him!

He sprung forward at the glad thought, and came near meeting his death—his foot slipped, and he dropped over the edge of the narrow trail, only saved by his hands from falling into a deep crevice, his fingers closing with a grip of desperation as he recalled his former experience with those merciless waters.

As he hung half in the water, another shout came to his ears, louder and clearer than before; but not from the narrow trail to which he clung so desperately—from high up on the rocks above!

It was a marvel that the discovery did not paralyze his muscles so as to throw him a helpless victim in the torrent's grasp; but it produced the contrary effect. He dragged himself up on the ledge, his gaze stupidly fixed on the further cliff, where a ruddy light was just making itself visible. And as he gazed, he made out a number of armed figures outlined against the sky, two of them bearing freshly-kindled torches, which they waved and held at arm's-length over the escarpment.

"Mann—Dick Mann!" shouted Judd Varley, at the top of his voice, as he tried in vain to pierce the utter obscurity below him, rendered all the more impenetrable by the glare of his torch. "Curse you, man! what's happened?"

Hart Oakes caught his breath sharply as he listened, for, like a revelation of truth, he knew just what must have transpired.

Judd Varley was trying more stubbornly than ever to achieve the death or capture of his intended victim. He had learned in some manner of this trail; perhaps from the very man whom he was now cursing so viciously; and had sent him to steal upon the Big Bracer unawares, no doubt to assassinate him as he slept. And while so striving, Dick Mann had come into collision with the giant refugee, the darkness hindering either from seeing the other, the roar of the river drowning the noise they made in advancing. And—he shivered as he remembered how utterly helpless he had found himself in that flood!

"And him so badly wounded! With a desperate devil clinging to him!"

Judd Varley broke into another storm of cursing, lifting his voice sharply as he uttered the words:

"Throw your light down, Ginger! I'll swear the voice came from right under where you stand! Drop it straight, you idiot!"

Followed by a tiny train of sparks, a torch came shooting down almost directly in front of where Hart Oakes crouched, but luckily it struck in the water and was immediately extinguished.

"Try it a bit further along," cried Varley, witnessing this failure. "There must be a trail there, for—Dick Mann, you hound!"

"Give a man time to—I'm nearly strangled!"

One's brain works swiftly in a critical emergency, and almost without thought as to how he could carry out the deception, yet save himself, Hart Oakes shouted out that disjointed sentence in an assumed voice, trusting to the roaring waters to cover the difference.

"What's happened?" eagerly cried Varley, leaning perilously far over the cliff in his anxiety to learn all. "What made you yelp out like that?"

"Who wouldn't when—I run chuck-up ag'in the devil himself!"

"What do you mean? Curse you, Dick! can't you spit it out clean?"

"Ain't I tryin'?" called back Oakes in his stolen voice, clearing his brains with a desperate effort of will. "Give a man a chance, after he's been lockin' horns with the devil himself, won't you?"

"Was it the Big Bracer, Dick?" eagerly yelled Varley, fairly dancing in his intense suspense.

"Was it him? Say it was, and—"

"It was him or his ghost, and I'mbettin' ag'in the spook!" the counterfeit Dick Mann called back, with growing confidence in his bold bluff, as he escaped detection at the start.

"You've got him? Say, you've got him, man!"

"I had him—and he had me, you bet!" with a

hoarse laugh that startled himself, it was in such perfect keeping with his assumed character. "We butted heads afore I ever suspected I hadn't got the trail all to my lonesome self! An'-well, I hed to let him hev my blade, boss! It was that, or bear him company down the drink!"

There was a brief silence, during which Judd Varley could be seen making vicious gestures, clearly disappointed that the tidings was not still more favorable.

Hart Oakes made the most of his respite, rising up and feeling of the canyon wall as he crept cautiously along it, knowing that the roar of the waters would blind his change of position when the time came for him to use his stolen voice once more. He shivered sharply as his foot struck against a goodly-sized stone lying on the ledge, for it came perilously near casting him headlong into the river. Yet that accident was to prove a means of salvation for him ere many moments.

"All right, Mann," called out Varley, sharply, swinging his torch over the brink once more. "If you're dead sure it was the Big Bracer, you might as well come up again. We'll search for his carcass down-river, when we've got more time t' spare. You, Ginger!"

"All hyar, boss!" came a prompt response from above the sport.

"Drop a rope over, with a light at the end, so Dick can see to find it. Work lively, now!"

There was no time to lose, and Hart Oakes fully realized as much. If he retained his position, the light would surely reveal him to those interested eyes on the other brink. If he stole away, it would arouse suspicions of a dangerous sort, and search would surely be made for him without delay.

He stooped and picked up that heavy fragment of rock in his hands, heaving it high above his head, crying out sharply:

"Hurry up, curse you, Ginger! This trail is so narrow and slippery that—Help! for the love o'—"

His voice rose to a maniacal screech, and then he cast the heavy stone up as high as possible, a loud splash following, distinct enough to reach all ears above, despite the roar of the river. And he gave one more wild yell, cutting it short, as if smothered by the torrent.

As rapidly as possible he crept along the ledge down river, while Judd Varley and his satellites shouted and yelled and danced in wild excitement on the cliff, completely deceived by that realistic fraud.

"Split your throats, ye devils!" grimly muttered the fugitive as he increased the distance between himself and those dancing torches as rapidly as he dared in the intense gloom. "Give me a little time, and I'll—"

"Lower some one with your rope, Ginger!" shouted Varley, just then. "Let him keep it tied about him, and you keep pace with him above. If there's the ghost of a chance for poor Dick, he's got to have it."

Hart Oakes paused barely long enough to fully comprehend this new peril, then pressed on in hopes that the narrow trail would increase in width, or speedily begin to make its way upward to the level ground. But he had not taken a dozen paces when he realized that he must abandon this hope, almost as soon as conceived.

Judd Varley was hurrying along the opposite side of the river, giving his orders as he came:

"Get your ropes ready, lads! Dick may catch on a rock, and we'll give him the benefit of that chance, anyway! Sling your torches so they won't burn the rope too quick, and we'll let lights down to see a bit of the bottom—for luck!"

"For little I'd let light through you, you devil!" grated Oakes as he crept along, the trail seeming to grow narrower and more slippery with every yard he covered. "And I will, if it comes to discovery!"

The situation was growing doubly critical. Already he could tell that Ginger Gore was preparing to send down a man as directed, bearing a light with him. Varley, not a hundred yards further down the river, was lowering a glowing torch at the end of a rope, shouting loudly in hopes of getting an answer from his henchman.

As a last hope—for he saw that the torches below were plainly illuminating both sides of the canyon—Oakes felt about for some means of scaling the wall itself, high enough at least to cover him from the search which he knew would be thoroughly made by the enemy.

He found a narrow crack in the wall, level with his breast and extending higher up than he could reach. It seemed a chance, and gathering all his strength and nerve, he began crawling upward.

Failure meant death, but it seemed his solitary chance.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SPORT FINDS SATAN'S LADDER.

FEELING this, Hart Oakes made the best of a bad situation. There was no time to stop to calculate the chances for or against his finding life above or death below. The men on both sides of the river were briskly at work, and with almost any moment some keen eye might

detect his creeping form and greet it with a leaden interrogation.

Guided by the sense of touch alone, the sport crept up the narrow crevice as rapidly as he dared, knowing that a single false grip, an uncertain foothold, might send him down to meet his death in that merciless torrent where—

He shivered sharply as he thought of poor Gypsy Gale!

How true had been his grim prediction that he would never see another sun rise, that he would never leave that horrible trap alive!

"I'll do my prettiest to even it all up for you, pardner!" Oakes muttered through his grating teeth as he cast a vengeful glance down and across the river, where he could still distinguish Judd Varley doing all that lay in his power to afford his lost henchman a chance for life. "And may be it'll not hold off so mighty long—may be this very blessed night!"

It was a conclusion drawn forth by something very different from the sight of Judd Varley working his forlorn hope. His head struck sharply against an overhanging rock which barred his further ascent!

During the last few feet of progress, the crack or crevice had widened until Oakes was forced to select one side of it for scaling, though he could span its width with outstretched arms. And trying to believe that the rock which barred his way only overhung that side, he quickly crossed to the other, only to find that further climbing was entirely out of the question, at least in that gloom.

The opening in the rock wall had abruptly ended in a slightly arched roof, as it might be termed, and without the aid of light, either natural or artificial, any attempt to climb past this would simply be suicidal.

With a certain grim despair Hart Oakes turned his head to count up the chances for and against him.

Below were Judd Varley and half a dozen men, some managing the suspended torches, others shouting loudly the name of their lost comrade and looking sharply for some signs of his person, living or dead.

Only a few yards above his perch, the sport knew Ginger Gore was lowering one of his fellows down to the narrow trail at the foot of the canyon wall, armed with a torch by which he would be enabled to not only guide his own steps, but discover aught suspicious which that brief struggle or the passage of the fugitives might have left behind.

"It'll be a mighty close call if he comes down this way!" frowned Oakes, with a glance directly beneath himself.

The waters seemed terribly close, and a searcher could hardly be expected to pass by without discovering that dark figure clinging to the wall, hardly thrice its length above the slippery trail.

"I hope you're sending a good Christian, Ginger!" grimly muttered the thoroughbred as he settled back as far as practicable in the hole, bracing himself with feet and shoulders while he drew a revolver from its scabbard, silently turning the loaded cylinder around to make sure the dampness had not clogged its working parts. "For if his eyes are too mighty sharp, he's going to cash in too awful quick!"

Now that he had given over all effort to climb further, Oakes was not long in making a fairly welcome discovery. The hole in which he found himself, might easily have been one worse for concealment, after all, as the growing light to his right hand revealed. That left his body wholly in the shadow, and he could only catch a glimpse of the trail below by craning his neck forward.

"Who knows? What's to make the critter look up, anyhow?"

Nothing but pure accident, thanks to his having so adroitly stolen the voice of Dick Mann, and supplemented it by that fictitious fall from the treacherous trail. Nothing, unless Judd Varley and his division on the further side should make the discovery of the motionless figure in the crevice by the ruddy glare of their torches; for they had apparently abandoned all hope of finding their fellow below, and were slowly making their way up the river toward the spot where the man selected by Ginger Gore was now steadyng himself on the damp and slippery ledge just above the level of the roaring waters.

Hart Oakes drew as far back as possible, bowing his head to hide his pale face, keeping his weapons where no reflected ray could add to the chances of discovery. Yet, as Judd Varley passed along with his gang swinging their glowing lights, it seemed impossible for them to miss spying that living figure, motionless though it was.

No doubt Hart Oakes magnified the chances, for that was perfectly natural. His covert was really a better one than he dared hope, and as there was naught to lead the enemy to suspect such hiding, it is not so very remarkable that neither Varley nor his men espied him.

"Make sure neither Dick nor that murdering rascal are anywhere on the trail!" shouted Varley to the fellow who, with torch in hand and rope fastened beneath his arm-pits, was cautiously feeling his way along the river's brink. "It's

what Dick should have done, or else held back until day came!"

"I reckon he's paid fer bein' so mighty confident, boss!"

"He's cashed in, I reckon! He said he stuck the Big Bracer; look for red ink, will you?"

After a few minutes' silence, the searcher gave a loud shout.

"Thar's blood on this rock, but—if it's old or new—"

"Odds is the difference, anyway! Slide on up river, and we'll make sure the red-handed rascal really crawled out of his den!"

If the searcher felt any serious objections to filling such a position, he made no audible protest. And then the lights slowly faded away until Oakes could see them no longer.

"Now what? Shall I make another try for the trail?"

That was quickly decided, and in the negative.

Not only was it highly probable that Judd Varley and his gang would return down river as soon as satisfied that the Big Bracer had escaped from his den, but even his strong nerves were not equal to the task, after what had happened to his companion of so short a time ago.

"If I can't crawl up the wall, I'll lay here until daylight comes, that's what!" the sport doggedly decided.

A very few minutes satisfied him that he could creep no further up the canyon wall at that point, and he dared not risk finding a more favorable opening, at least until after the enemy should take their final departure. And settling into as comfortable a position as was possible under the circumstances, he bided his time.

It was just as well that he did so. Within half an hour, at the outside, the searchers returned down the river, having found the den vacant, and no trail leading up beyond it.

"It's hyar or hyarabouts that Dick ketched him, boss!" shouted up the searcher, as he paused almost directly underneath the hole in which Hart Oakes was crouching, breathless, hand on revolver, ready to sell his life at as high a price as possible in case he should be discovered. "I don't reckon they's any need o' tryin' any furder down."

"Run it out the end, now you've started. I'll make it all right to you. It's just possible Dick or Gypsy may have struck a rock!"

With his strained hearing the sport could hear the fellow growling sulkily at this command, but he made no open opposition, and the lights slowly moved down the stream, soon fading from view of the fugitive.

"That lets me out, so far as they're concerned, but—if I had about three ton of grub here to keep me from thinking—ugh!"

Those were terribly long and weary hours. He dared not sleep, lest he slip from his perch to meet death in those horribly roaring waters. He could not make up his mind to again risk crawling along that slippery trail through the intense darkness. All he could do was to wait for the coming of dawn, and fight back the grim phantoms of memory with what nerve he could summon to his assistance.

With the first rays of a new day, Oakes eagerly scanned the opposite wall, though he knew it was hardly likely Varley would place a guard, after having such seemingly positive proofs of his victim's death. And as he discovered naught suspicious, the sport crept down to the damp ledge, creeping along it until his nerves grew steady and firm as usual, then making greater haste, urged on by his hungrily gnawing stomach, for he had eaten nothing for full forty hours.

"And with all the rough-and-tumble exercise I've taken, that's about equal to a solid month!" he grumbled, keeping on the watch for a point where he might scale the canyon wall without running too great a risk of breaking his neck by a slip and a tumble down again.

This he found before the sun began to shine into the deep channel through the rocks, and as he reached the level above, he drew his first full, free breath in hours.

His first thought was to make sure no enemies were in sight. His second turned to food and eating.

"Anything, from snake to buzzard! And if I run on a human critter as my first show of flesh—well, I'd hate to swear I wouldn't turn cannibal, just for once!"

Fortunately he was spared this necessity. Within the hour he was greedily tearing away at the barely warm hind leg of a jack rabbit, while the remainder of the carcass was cooking over a little fire of dry sticks. And when he finally gave a mighty yawn of satiety, a famishing wolf would have growled in disgust over that closely picked heap of bones!

"Now if I could lie down and sleep for about a solid week, I reckon I'd feel something more like a white man," he grumbled, as he reluctantly rose to his feet, loosening his belt and looking around to learn, if possible, the correct course to follow. "But there's that young lady! And I'm all she's got to depend on—worse luck!"

Gypsy Gale had given the sport minute directions how to regain the regular stage route, after escaping from the canyon, but now that he came to follow those directions, Hart Oakes found it none so easy. The country was perfect

ly new to him. It was so wild and rugged. Each prominent landmark looked so much like any one of a dozen others, that it is nothing strange that, long before noon, he was forced to admit to himself that he was all at sea—that he was once more lost!

But he doggedly kept tramping, making for the highest practicable points, in hopes of thus sighting the trail, or the town itself. More than once he believed he had sighted the road, only to find his mistake on putting it to the test. And as the sun began to slope to the West, his anxiety grew into absolute torture.

If Olive Tempest was indeed to come by that day's stage, as Gypsy Gale calculated, and he should fail to find the road in time to intercept her! If she should fall into the grip of Judd Varley!

"I'll take her out, and his grip'll be mighty weak and feeble when I've done it, bet your sweet life!" he muttered, viciously.

It was late in the afternoon, when Oakes had absolutely abandoned all hopes of discovering the stage route, that he actually stumbled upon it—metaphorically speaking, of course!

He doggedly kept to his original plan of scaling the heights in order to gain a wider view, and was crossing an ugly ridge near where it made a sharp angle with itself, when, far below him he caught sight of the river in which he had so nearly met his death. And determining to follow it down until he "came out somewhere!" he pressed ahead.

To come abruptly on the road, here winding around the mountain, on a ledge barely wide enough for a single team, with the river brawling along in its deep channel, where—

A clatter of hoofs and rattling of wheels startled him, and looking up the steep road, he gave a wild, gasping cry of horror!

Running at full speed down the steep and straight trail, unguided and uncontrollable, came the stage! And out of the window next the wall, a woman was holding her arms, frantically trying to open the door!

"My God! they'll pitch over the turn!" gasped Oakes, in horror. "A woman—is it pard's little girl?"

CHAPTER XXII.

A DIABOLICAL DEED.

"Will he never make a sign? Will it never come?"

Leaning back against a gray rock, gazing steadily yet impatiently through a pair of field-glasses, Queen Esther, dressed much as she had been when Hart Oakes first made her acquaintance on the preceding evening, muttered these sentences, her voice filled with angry suspense. Which came to an abrupt end, however, as she caught sight of a white signal fluttering for an instant from the top of the distant tree on which her gaze was focused.

"Ready, lad," she cried, in harsh, strained tones as she closed the glass and tossed it to a masked man who stood a little to one side. "Billy gives the signal that all's right! The stage is coming, and our game is along! Ready—and the man who forgets or botches his part had better never been born!"

"You're certain you read the signal aright?" asked the tall road-agent to whom she had flung her glasses.

"Am I a fool, Bark Matson?" she sharply snapped. "Am I blind? Do you think I could make an error, after all our careful planning?"

The tall fellow seemed a little cowed by this vixenish outburst, and meekly muttered:

"I meant could it be that Billy made a mistake, you know."

"I only wish I was as certain no one else will blunder! Take command, now. You know what to do, and how to do it! Put it through in good style, or—well, I believe I could find it in my heart to shoot even you, Matty, if failure comes now!"

"You know, dear—" But Queen Esther did not wait for his passionate response. She turned and disappeared through the bushes which here lined the trail.

There was a reddish glow in the dark eyes which followed her until lost to sight, then Bark Matson hurriedly assured himself that all was in readiness for carrying out their truly diabolical plot.

It was a long and hard tug up that winding trail, but the driver was an old hand, and knew how to favor his team when necessary. Knowing that when the ridge was crossed, Satan's Ladder lay just before them, more difficult to descend with safety than any other part of that stage, he let his beasts take their time.

"Hands up, pard! We'll riddle both you and the hearse ef they's a weenty bit of a kick, you want to mind?"

With a stupidly drooping jaw, the driver jerked up his team, almost on the crest of the hill. Road-agents were something new on that line, and it amazed him to find his path so barred; but he knew enough to obey an order which was so emphasized by frowning rifles.

Startled ejaculations, mingling with a truly feminine cry, came from the interior, but as Bark Matson harshly thundered:

"Turn the stage into a riddle ef they kick, lads!" the outcry came to an abrupt ending.

Revolver in hand, he strode to the door, and thrusting the grim muzzle through the open window by way of a visiting card, he growled:

"No monkey-work, gents, if you please! We won't rumple a feather ef you act white. But—waal, you hear me yeip to the boys I reckon?"

"Don't let blizzer, boss! They's a leddy in hyar, an'—"

"Give her a leetle more room then, pardner, by tumblin' out with your fingers empty an' your rags full—you hear me sing?"

"Wobblin' ekil to ary mockin'-bird I ever knowed, boss!" mumbled the digger, shambling out of the coach as Matson opened the door.

He was promptly followed by two more passengers, both of his own sex, and each one looking white "about the gills," as the vulgate hath it. And then came a musical voice, trembling just a little:

"Shall I alight, sir? I do not want to anger you, but—"

Here voice broke in a frightened sob as that black masked face was thrust in through the window, those keen eyes flashing into her pale and startled countenance.

She was alone. And Bark Matson felt confident that no error had been made in their calculations thus far.

"I don't reckon you need git so bad skeert, ma'am," he growled, in his gruffest tones, drawing back his head a little, but still keeping her fixed by that glittering pair of eyes. "I don't reckon it'll break the bank ef we do let you skip toll-free, but—I say, lads!"

"Yourn, boss!" came the prompt response.

Bark Matson drew back far enough to take in the situation. So far as he could see, everything was in order and "according to Hoyle."

One mask stood at the heads of the leaders, firmly gripping their bits. Two others guarded the wheel pair, at the same time keeping the driver covered with a brace of revolvers. But somehow this last sight did not exactly please him, judging from his sharp command:

"Tumble out o' that box, Johnnyn! I've hearn tell you toted more'n a whisky-flask in that off boot o' yours!"

"Fore Moses, boss, I hain't got even a toothpick, let alone—"

"Tumble off, I say!" and his pistol swiftly covered the frightened driver. "Who said toothpick? I mean rocks, durn ye!"

"Ef I got a red, hope I may— Ain't I comin'?" the last words rising in a terrified squeal as he literally obeyed orders, at the no small risk of his precious neck.

"Git in line with the gents, thar, Johnny, an' hold your bush ef you ain't dead-gone fer a fambly funeral. Stiddy 'em, lads!"

"Bet ye, boss!" grimly responded the road-agents who guarded the quartette, turning them back toward the stage, and making them hold their arms up at full length.

"Look to the team, lads, though I don't reckon they'll make any fuss afore they gits thar second wind, anyway. An' now—ef I mought trouble you a weenty bit, ma'am," turning to the stage window again.

"I have only this, sir," timidly murmured the young woman, her little gloved hand holding forth a small *portemonnaie*. "I wear no jewels, and if you will be so kind— If I had known—"

"You'd a' fetched 'long a hull Nashnul Bank—don't I know it, ma'am?" grinned the road-agent, but coolly accepting the proffer. "Not fer keeps, ye want to know, ma'am, but jest as a excuse fer furder 'quaintance—ef so be you're 'greeable to that effec', ma'am."

Olive Tempest shrunk back with a little shiver, more frightened by this clumsy playfulness than by his former ferocity.

"Pears like that don't hit ye whar ye live, nuther, pritty!" laughed the road-agent, slipping the wallet into his pocket, then adding, briskly:

"All the same, rules is rules, an'—but fu'st off, you're bound fer what place, ma'am?"

"Silver Lode, I believe it is calle'. But—"

"Jest a-travelin', or goin' som'ers, ma'am? Which is to ax, was you thinkin' o' settlin' down in Silver Lode, or jest passin' through?"

"I—I do not know, sir. I was—my father was to meet me at a place of that name, but whether he intended to stay there—"

"The—good—Lawd!" ejaculated Matson, in affected amazement. "Your pap livin' in Silver Lode? An'—a beauty like you—that camp! Don't know ef you'll stop fer good, or—I say, ma'am?"

"If I might—I'm frightened so—sit down, sir?" gasped the poor girl, for despite her years, she looked little more than a child, and could scarcely keep her feet.

"Set down twi'et, ef you want, ma'am!" laughed Matson, apparently enjoying the terror his gruff manners and gruffer speech inspired. "An' while you're settin', mebbe you'll try to tell a cur'us critter what fer feller this pap o' yours mought happen fer to be? Mebbe I knows him; mebbe we've got drunk an' slep' in the same mud-hole 'long o' each other. Jest think! how romantic that would be, eb?"

From among the bushes came a sharp, impatient whistle from the lips of Queen Esther.

Bark Matson heard it, and had no difficulty in correctly interpreting its meaning, though he gave no outward show of being moved by that fact. He only dropped his coarse raillery, speaking short and sternly:

"What's your pap's name, I'm axin' ye, ma'am?"

"Tempest—Stuart Tempest, sir."

"Then he ain't none o' my truck, ef it'll tickle ye any fer to be sure o' that, pritty. Never hearn tell o' the name afore. But that don't count. Men is men, in these parts, an' names ain't nothin'. Now, I'll send you back this yer' doin's, ma'am, ef you stop in Silver Lode long enough. We ain't robbin' of ye. Jest a loanin', ye want to know!"

With a clumsy bow he turned away from the door, leaving it with the handle jammed so securely by means of a block that no ordinary strength could open it quickly. He made a covert signal, which was readily interpreted by the fiends by the horses, who lost no time in carrying out their prior instructions. Deftly each tail was raised, and a needle-studded pad slipped underneath; then they sprung aside, just in time to escape injury, as the pain-maddened horses dashed away at top speed, whirling the stage after them, bound for destruction!

The driver, startled by the clatter, wheeled as he gasped:

"God above! who done that? They're gone—the gal-down Satan's Ladder to sart'in death!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

MANUFACTURING AN HEIRESS.

FORGETTING all else in his horror, the driver sprung as though to chase the runaway team, but before he could take a second stride, Bark Matson, with clubbed revolver, struck him down with vicious certainty.

"Stiddy, lads!" he roared, with an ugly oath, both hands arming and grim muzzles covering the startled passengers as though he anticipated immediate trouble. "Hold 'em level! Ef they try to break away—"

"Oh, I say *durn it!*" howled the grizzled digger who had been the first one to step from the stage in answer to Bark Matson's summons. "It hain't we'uns that's runnin' away! Let up—don't shoot!"

He ducked and dodged with his head and body in a most ridiculous manner, trying to keep out of range of those ugly bores, though not daring to stir from his tracks lest that be taken as a sign of flight.

His two companions in duress were almost too badly frightened to do even so much, and had they not in a measure supported each other, they would certainly have fallen limply to the ground.

"We ain't takin' no chances—we ain't!" and Bark Matson still held the trio covered as he added: "Run in an' kick the underpinnin' loose, Monkey—good boy!"

One of the masks promptly acted on this call, fastening a grip on the two passengers, jerking them backward just as he tripped their feet from under them, dodging aside to let them fall with full force upon the ground. And he seemed on the point of serving the veteran after the same fashion, when that worthy saved him trouble by plumping down upon his ragged stomach in the dirt, hastily squealing:

"Flag o' truce, pard! Don't hit a gent when he's down as low's he kin git 'thout havin' a airthquake fer a side pard to split open a handy crack fer—ugh!"

An explosive grunt came from his lungs as "Monkey" dropped heavily across his back, revolver muzzle tapping his grizzled pate, looking up to the chief and asking:

"Shell I ram a gag in from this side, boss?"

"Not ef he bottles up his wind, Monkey! Look to them other gents, you critters, while—"

A loud crashing in the bushes cut short his burried instructions to the men, and he sprung quickly to one side just in time to avoid being knocked down by a horse and rider—the latter wrapped in a thick, long cloak.

"Leave a guard over the game—the rest mount and follow me!" cried the cloaked figure, in harsh, indistinct tones which few who knew her would ever attribute to the silvery-tongued woman chief. "We must save that poor girl, if human endeavors can avail aught!"

"Easy up a leetle mite, Monk!" muttered the grizzled fraud whose broad back supported the guard. "Don't she play it high-per-coon, though? Ain't she jest a howlin' daisy from Flower-stall?"

"Bottle up—d'y'e want them to smoke—"

"They're so mighty skeered they couldn't tell 'emselves from a hole in the ground!" chuckled the rascal, but with lowered tones.

For all her seeming excitement, Queen Esther, secure from future recognition in her cloak that shrouded her body, and the slouched felt hat that covered half her long mask, reined in her steed and waited until Bark Matson could secure an animal and wheel at her side. And as they rode across the little level space which extended to the top of Satan's Ladder, she hoarsely uttered, in tones meant only for his keen ears:

"Will it work? Will they pitch over at the Elbow?"

"Only a miracle can save them," came the swift response.

"Then all's done but crowing."

And from behind that sable mask came a laugh, musical in itself, but so heartless, so diabolical when taken in connection with what had just occurred.

Mechanically both riders jerked in their steeds as they gained the top of Satan's Ladder, and swept their glowing eyes down the straight, steep, narrow trail—to see nothing alive of brute or human nature.

"It's over, one way or the other," muttered Bark Matson, with a long-drawn breath that lifted him in his stirrups.

Queen Esther cast a glance over her shoulder. Half a dozen men in masks, all mounted, were coming after them. Beyond, guarded each by an armed man, lay the three passengers, two nearly frightened out of their senses, the other playing his part to perfection, cunning rascal that he was.

The driver lay as he had fallen under that heavy stroke, dead or unconscious.

"It's all right at that end, anyway," she muttered, touching her steed with an armed heel, and sending it down the Ladder at a brisk trot. "If all is as snug at the other."

"Steady! if the brute slips or stumbles, you're gone!" cried Matson in alarm, as he followed closely. "Think of—"

"I'm thinking of that, safe enough," with a short, hard laugh, as she glanced over the precipice on their right. "Thinking it'd be a quicker death right here than even at the Elbow."

Matson was silenced. There was something so strangely reckless in her voice and manner that he felt awed, troubled, fearful for the outcome of their diabolical plot. He felt that speech only made matters worse, and just then he was helpless to do more than warn.

Satan's Ladder was only one of the perilous points of which the mountain stage-lines can boast. There was no other point at which the range could be crossed within a score miles in either direction by wheeled conveyances, and this one only after great pains and labor had been brought into requisition.

For full a quarter of a mile the trail, partly blasted out of the living rocks, partly the work of nature, ran straight as fate, angling sharply at the end of this distance, forming what was popularly known as "Satan's Elbow." Beyond this the course was straight for a few rods, then swinging around in a gentle curve until the level ground was reached.

In no one place along its length was there room on Satan's Ladder for teams to meet and pass each other, but there was seldom occasion for guarding against such an awkward *contretemps*, for rare indeed was the wheeled rig that made the ascent or descent, save the daily stage.

The great length of the Ladder made railing its outer edge altogether out of the question, and though there was a line of rocks placed to guard its most dangerous point—at the abrupt turn called the Elbow—nothing else was done to prevent an accident.

None had happened since the route was formally opened, but all knew that it was a risk of life each time the stage made the trip over that portion of the route. If anything broke or gave way—

With eyes glowingly red through the slits in her sable mask, Queen Esther drew rein at the Elbow, one gloved hand stretched out and pointing downward! No need to speak. Every one of the party had seen how the loose rock wall at the abrupt curve was broken—all knew that a frightful accident (!) had occurred!

Bark Matson leaped over the head of his horse as he wrenched him up, and caught the woman chief firmly by an arm, uttering a shaken warning which met her ears alone, thanks to the sullen roaring of the river tearing along through its rocky channel directly below them.

For at the Elbow of Satan's Ladder, the base of the cliff was washed by the same turbulent stream in which Hart Oakes had fought so desperately for dear life; the same whose angry flood had carried away Gypsy Gale, locked in the frightened grip of Dick Mann.

A sheer descent of full fifty feet, with naught to break a fall until the rock-broken, foam-crested waves were reached.

And there, lodged on one of the water-washed rocks, lay the terribly shattered remnant of the stage-coach.

Caught in a crevice, one mangled carcass lay hidden save its tail and haunches; the other horses either sunken beneath the surface or torn free from the wreck and washed down the river.

Not a sign of life. Only that wreck, doubly hideous when it is remembered what a precious freight it carried!

This was what the disguised woman was pointing at, but the grip of auxious Matson on her arm broke the brief spell, and a sharp, metallic laugh parted her lips as she cleared herself of the cloak, flinging it across his arm as she leaped to the ground beside Matson.

"Quick! there's no time to waste! There mustn't be even a shadow of suspicion rest on this part of the job!"

Her hands were busy as her tongue the while.

She flung aside her slouched hat, tore off her sable mask. She removed the close-fitting sack coat which she had worn under the cloak, and another touch of her deft fingers loosened a cascade of jettied hair from its snug fastenings.

"Lively with the rope! Give me the bundle! Every second is worth a snug fortune now!" she panted, stamping her booted foot angrily.

Yet there was no perceptible waste of time. Everything was going on smoothly, as though each actor was letter perfect in his part.

The road-agents were all on foot, two of their number guarding the animals. Matson caught a small package from one of their number, and even as Queen Esther spoke, he placed it in her arms. And as she swung it on her shoulders, held there by a prepared sling, his hands were passing a noosed rope about her person, while four sturdy masks gripped the slack, ready for the word.

"Close your eyes while going down, and don't throw off the noose until you have secure footing—your life is worth more than—"

"Don't whine—act!" she sharply interjected.

"Am I a baby?" "You're my heart—my more than life, darling!"

Only for her ear the words, so full of intense passion. None other ear could possibly have caught their meaning, yet Queen Esther shrank away with a little shiver.

But she covered the action perfectly, and in his strong agitation the tall road-agent failed to read it aright. If he had, would he not have met a different fate when the end came?

With a fearless step she balanced herself upon the rock left bare by the wrecked stage and frantic team as it plunged through the frail wall of rocks. One keen, sweeping glance up and down the narrow trail. Then she spoke quickly, calmly:

"Steady me over the edge, Bark. Then see that the fellows don't shake me out of the loop, or—slip it up around my throat. I'm not ready for actual hanging—just yet!"

Matson shivered violently as her low, mellow laugh came to his ears, despite the sullen roaring of the waters. Strong as were his nerves, hardened his heart by a life of crime, great as was his passion for this woman, her cool carelessness after that diabolical tragedy shocked him keenly.

Without a word he lowered her lithe form over the escarpment, and with a death-grip on the rope he managed her perilous descent, seconded with steady nerves by the brawny fellow at his back.

Without a slip, without a jar, smoothly and evenly the rope was paid out, their grip aided by the frequent knots tied to it, and within one minute from the time of her leaving the solid rock, Queen Esther was safely lodged on a rock nearly opposite the wrecked coach.

Breathlessly Bark Matson gazed down upon her. He saw her unsling the package from her back and tear it open, shaking out the outer garb fit for her sex. He saw her coolly bend over and dip the garments into the angry waters, then glance upward with a gay wave of her hand. He lingered until she stepped back against the face of the cliff to slip on the garments, then drew back, fingering the rope as a fisherman fingers his hand-line.

There presently came a sharp tug on the rope, and he quickly drew it in, hand over hand, one of the masks deftly winding the slack about his body as it came up, and when all was secured thus, he slipped on the cloak, hat, mask—all the articles discarded by Queen Esther! And in another moment he filled the saddle she had vacated, looking her second self, even in the anxious eyes of Bark Matson. And then—

From down at the bottom of Satan's Ladder came loud yells and cheers! And as the clatter of horses' hoofs came floating upward, the road-agents leaped upon their steeds and wheeled in hasty flight, just as a strong party of armed men came into view far below them!

CHAPTER XXIV.

MAN-HUNTER TURNED WOMAN-SAVER.

So prompt and speedy was this flight, that it may well be doubted if more than one or two of the rescuing party even caught a glimpse of the road agents before they vanished from view around Satan's Elbow. But that was enough, and Judd Varley, leading the van, urged his good steed up the sharp incline, his voice ringing out in a wild cheer.

"Spurs bloody, men!" he cried, suiting the action to the word. "We'll get 'em yet! If we don't, we'll copper their little game, anyway!"

Up the slope at full speed, rushing past the Elbow without even a glance toward the broken wall, seemingly too intensely excited to observe that terribly significant fact. And Judd Varley, still in the lead, sent a couple of hasty bullets whistling after the road-agents as the rear-most member gained the level ground at the top of the Ladder. "I've marked one, anyway!" he laughed, sternly, slipping the weapon back into its case and giving both hands to aiding his panting horse along the steep trail. "Maybe we'll be in time, even yet! Maybe—"

If he completed the sentence, it was lost to other ears in the sharp ringing of iron-shod hoofs on the flinty trail, and the sullen roar floating up out of the river below them.

At best, Satan's Ladder was a hard test of wind, and the animal never lived that could cover it upward in a run, and gain the level bit of ground on the backbone without feeling pretty well "pumped out." But apparently Judd Varley was too intensely excited to think of this, in his eagerness to make his mark on the masked gang. And of course his lead was followed to the letter by all behind him.

Panting, staggering, his horse came to an abrupt halt on the backbone, its rider glaring fiercely about, pistol in hand, searching for a living target on which to practice in dead earnest. But in vain. With only half as great a stretch of slope to climb, the road-agents had been able to keep on at speed, and not even the clatter of their animals' hoofs came back to guide their pursuers.

"For the love o' Moses, don't ride us down, pard!" came a choked and frightened voice, giving Varley a sharp start as his gaze lowered to catch a glimpse of four human figures lying on the ground, only a few yards below the crest.

Swift as thought his weapon covered them, and he cried sharply:

"Hands up, you curs! I'll blow you through at—"

"Hol' on—hol' on!" spluttered the grizzled rascal, rolling over and thrusting his bound feet as high as he could stretch them. "We ain't them, but us! Trussed up like a fat turkey—don't shoot!"

Judd Varley leaped to the ground, striding forward with pistol still at a level, his face pale as death, his eyes glowing redly, his voice harsh and strained as he demanded:

"Who are you? What has happened? Where'd they go? Speak, or—"

"Look at Zimmerman!" cried a voice at his elbow, and the pale speaker pointed toward the motionless driver, whose blood-marked face was turned upward, grim and shocking in its appearance. "Dead! and the stage—God above!" in deepened horror at the truly frightful idea born of that question.

With a vigorous effort the grizzled rascal brought himself into a sitting posture, the picture of stupid terror, as he glared at the party, now collected in goodly numbers, all excited, all eager, yet fearing to learn the worst.

"It run away, an'—they was a gal into it, wuss luck!"

Judd Varley leaped forward and gripped him tightly by the arm, his eyes glowing, his teeth showing wickedly as he grated:

"Run away! How? Which way? Not—Good heavens, man! not down the Ladder! Don't say that—don't!"

"Ef I say anythin', boss, I reckon I'll hev to say that," whined the cunning actor, seemingly frightened half out of his senses.

Judd Varley staggered back, pale as a corpse, glancing from face to face, the majority of them reflecting his own assumed horror.

"Down the Ladder—and we saw nothing of it!" he gasped.

"Thar's the Elbow!" huskily ventured one of the men.

Judd Varley sprung through the crowd, hoarsely crying:

"Look to these fellows, some of you! The rest follow me!"

He brushed past the jaded horses and rushed rapidly down the long stretch until he reached the broken wall on the outer curve of Satan's Elbow. He actually shivered as he flashed a glance at the half-hidden wreck in the river, then leaned far over the escarpment, shouting aloud.

Twice, thrice his voice rung out at a wild pitch, but no answer came back. And paler than ever, he looked as the awe-stricken citizens began to gather about the sharp angle.

"If there was—if anybody was in the stage—"

"Hope may die ef they wasn't a gal, boss!" panted the veteran, as he came hobbling to the spot. "When the team broke loose—"

Hark! Floating upward came a faint, shrill wail!

Judd Varley flung himself flat on his face and leaned far over the brink, glaring downward—to distinguish a female figure clinging to a rock, half-in, half-out of the river!

Instantly the edge was lined with eager spectators, and fully one-half of their number saw the same sight.

"I see her lift her head—bang on, my brave girl!" Varley yelled at the top of his voice. "For life don't let go! We'll save you or lose our own live in the attempt!"

Again that faint, pitiful wail came floating upward.

"To the horses—bring ropes—lively, men!" cried Varley, as he drew back from the brink and began tearing off his belt of arms and extra clothing. "Quick! it's for life, men!"

Two-thirds of the party were already tearing at speed up the slope, as eager to save as they had been to slay but a few minutes before. And as there was nothing more to be done until ropes

came, Varley once more lay on the brink, shouting out encouragement to the woman below.

In a marvelously brief space of time, considering the nature and scope of ground to be covered, men came back with ropes, and Varley with his own hands knotted the lariats together, careful as a man naturally would be when he knew that his own life depended on the thoroughness of his work.

"I found this, boss, over in the brush nigh whar them critters was trussed up, an' I didn't know—she'll be mighty wet an' cold an' apt fer to ketch a chill, ye know!" spluttered one of the party, holding out a black cloak.

It was the same which Queen Esther had worn. The one donned by her double, to guard against any possible chance of her figure being missed by the driver or the two honest passengers. And after this fear was past, cast aside on a bush, as if torn loose through an accident in its wearer's headlong flight, to still further serve its owner.

"Hold on to it—be ready with it when I fetch the poor woman up with me," muttered Varley as he rapidly tested knot after knot.

He deftly formed a loop in which to rest his feet, while another one, wrapped thick with a heavy coat, passed around his broad chest, just beneath his armpits. Then, with a short caution to his companions, he backed over the escarpment.

Slowly, steadily, two-score strong arms lowered him down the face of the precipice, two men holding a roll of garments on the rock where the rope glided over, to prevent the strain parting the line. Down, until a slackening told them that the noble rescuer had reached the bottom and found secure footing.

"An' she's still kickin'!" breathlessly announced one of the men who had nothing more important to do than keeping watch over the edge of the precipice. "He's got her—hooray for burraw!"

Wildly rung out their cheering, and back from the depths below there came the words:

"Thank heaven it's no worse! She's still living!"

"Then I'm open fer big bets that she's got full-grown wings onto her!" boldly cried one of the party. "Why, they couldn't a feather tumble down all them ways 'thout knockin' its durned brains out!"

There came no offer of acceptance, if he looked for such, for just then Judd Varley gave the agreed-upon signal that all was in readiness for hoisting away. And with the men keeping the rope from chafing, the rest drew in the tensely strained rope hand over hand. Not with headlong haste, dire though they felt the ordeal must be to their leader, with a helpless woman hanging on his arm and only that line between them and a frightful death on the ragged rocks below. Slowly, steadily, without jerk or tremor to set their precious burden to swinging back and forth. And then the guards on the verge change their grip to the rigid arms of the pale gambler, drawing him up high enough for his feet to secure a footing on solid ground once more:

This was by his own wish, for he refused to permit them to relieve him of his burden.

"Room—don't crowd, gentlemen!" he panted, pale as death, staggering visibly as he crossed the narrow trail and gently deposited his silent burden on the rocks, catching up the cloak and wrapping it tenderly about her form, even shielding her ghastly pale face from curious eyes before drawing his tall figure erect, to cast off the noose.

Only a passing glimpse had any of the company gained of that face, but what they saw sent a thrill of wonder and awe through their veins.

It was so white, so deathlike, with its closed lids! Looking all the more so from the long, jet-black hair, still dripping with water, lying partially over her face and neck.

"She's only fainted, gentlemen," added Varley, as he glanced around the company, gripping one after another the strong and trusty hands to which he owed his immunity from death on those cruel rocks. "She held out brave and nervy as any man living, until she knew she was safe in my arms. Then—she fainted away!"

"It's God's mercy that she still lives!" reverently murmured one of the citizens, his face and tones both showing the awe with which the thought inspired him. "Over Satan's Elbow! And lives to tell of it! If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes—I can't believe it even now!"

Judd Varley frowned darkly. He didn't want the matter looked at in any such light as that. He wanted it taken on trust, as a sort of natural miracle, if it must, but there might be peril to his bold plot in too close examination.

"She's living, but how long we can say that, may depend, gentlemen," he said, his tones regaining their wonted cold composure. "She needs more and better care than we can give her, in this place. The sooner she gets to Silver Lode, where a woman can look to her hurts and nurse her up, the better!"

"She cain't ride a hoss—an' yender's all they is left o' the ole hearse—cuss the crooked luck!" said the driver, his tones and his face showing how heavy the blow had fallen upon him, even

though he had no monetary interest in the property.

"Don't be a fool, man!" growled Varley, sharply. "Keep your ugly face out of range, in case she should come to! And the rest—we've got to make a litter, gentlemen! That's the only way we can get her safely over the trail to Silver Lode."

This was all that was needed to send the men skurrying off in hot haste, each one eager to have a hand in the affair, which would afford many an hour's talk for weeks to come.

Over Satan's Elbow in a runaway hearse! And alive to tell of it!

Judd Varley did not join in that mad skurry. He seemed to feel that he had done his share already, and he stood as a vigilant guard over the rescued woman.

There was little need of this. She made no sound. She lay as he had placed her, still and motionless as a corpse. And, more than once, the handsome gambler stooped to gently touch her bosom, as though fearing she must indeed be the corpse she so closely resembled.

In a marvelously brief space of time, the litter was completed. Two horses were fastened in line, long, springy poles running along each side, firmly secured to their saddles. Across this boughs were bound, covered with coats and shirts and saddle-cloths. On this the woman was placed, and slowly borne down Satan's Ladder.

And Hart Oakes watched them move, from the rocks above the trail!

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PLOTTERS IN COUNCIL.

NEVER once suspecting this—not for an instant dreaming that every action from first to last had been watched, noted and marked down for future use if occasion arose—wholly unconscious of the dangerous fact that the cool, nervy stranger sport had witnessed the audacious "manufacture of an heiress" from beginning to end from his snug covert among the rocks which overhung Satan's Ladder—the little procession wound its slow length down the dangerous trail.

On foot, with one hand touching the arm of the seemingly-unconscious woman as she lay on the rude litter, Judd Varley walked close beside her, on the inner side, ready in case of accident to snatch her out of peril with his strong arms.

"Rockon it tuck the tuck out o' the boss, workin' the Elbow!" one of the citizens ventured to remark, in an undertone, to his comrade.

"It's a heap more gal than elbow, to my thinkin'," was the dry response. "Looks to me as if they wasn't gwinne fer to be a mighty good shake fer a weddin' drunk—waal, now, it does, honey!"

Ba this as it may, Judd Varley drew a long breath of intense relief when the foot of the dangerous trail was reached in safety, and not until then did he take his ready grasp from the arm of the woman whom the majority present actually believed had so recently escaped from a frightful death through a miracle of good-luck!

As he fell back to reclaim his horse from the fellow who had led it this far, he hurriedly muttered in his willing ear:

"All eyes open, Joe! The lads look to you for orders. If any one tries to investigate the wreck, you be in advance. And if—there mustn't be any woman's body discovered, mind you!"

That was the one weak point in their bold as cunning scheme, and right well Judd Varley knew it. And yet, the danger was not so very great, after all.

The driver and passengers were ready to take oath that the stage contained only one person when the frightened team broke away to meet their death at Satan's Elbow. And had they not witnessed her daring rescue from the very jaws of death?

Though he seemed to have eyes and thoughts only for that fair figure lying so still and death-like on the litter, Judd Varley knew that not a soul dropped away from the party as they reached the bridge which spanned the river. And as the roar of the waters died out behind them, he felt assured that their scheme was surely winning.

It was still some distance to Silver Lode, after the river was crossed, and by this time the red glow of sunset was fading into the gray of twilight. But the only man who hastened on ahead of the little procession was one dispatched by Judd Varley himself to secure the best accommodations possible at the hotel for the injured lady.

Not long after the river was left behind them, a sensation stirred the admiring yet awed escort. There was a faint cry from the litter; and the young lady partially lifted her head, staring about with a bewildered look in her dark eyes.

"Where am I? What has—my heavens!" and a thrill of intense horror came into her voice as a flash of memory appeared to clear her clouded brain. "The cliff—the river—over to death!"

Judd Varley bent over the hysterical woman,

speaking rapidly, soothingly, though few of his words reached other ears than hers. But they seemed to be well chosen, for the poor lady grew calmer, and her fears seemed to die away, once for all.

"She's gritty, I want fer to tell ye, pard," muttered one of the citizens, combing his tangled beard with his fingers. "Tain't every man that'd simmer down so quick after takin' sech a fly-me-down-to-glory as Satan's Elbow hangs up—waal, not much!"

There was something in this. The young woman did recover her powers of speech and body in a remarkable manner for one who had taken such a wild fall as the large majority of the company firmly believed. She answered Judd Varley in tones as steady and far more distinct than the ones he saw fit to use. She sat up in the rude litter, wrapping that black cloak closely about her person, a fold passing over her head, concealing the greater portion of her pearly-white face.

But Varley would not let her risk too much. As he rode alongside the litter, his strong hand seemed to lend her support. And when the town was gained, and the litter halted in front of the hotel, where his messenger, together with the worthy host came out to receive them, he leaped to the ground and, despite her faint remonstrance, lifted the cloaked figure in his strong arms, bearing her into the building and up to the chamber which had been hastily prepared for her reception.

"Keep on the alert, girl!" he muttered hastily as he placed his fair burden on the bed. "I must see you as soon as I can steal a trick on these fools! Ready to open when you hear the old signal!"

"I will—caution, honey!" she murmured below her breath.

After all, it proved a much easier task than Judd Varley had dared hope, knowing as he did how much might hang on their complete avoidance of suspicion until after their plans were working smoothly. He had long boarded at the hotel, and after drinking a glass or two at the hotel bar, in recognition of the many compliments which poured upon him from all sides, what more natural than that he should retire to his chamber to remove the stains of that long and hard man-hunt?

First assuring himself that the poorly lighted corridor which ran from front to rear of the second story, with chambers lining each side, was deserted by all others, Judd Varley stole noiselessly to the chamber assigned "Miss Olive Tempest," tapping softly at the door, then rubbing his thumb along the panel, producing a peculiar "bur-r-r."

Almost instantly the door was opened, and he slipped inside.

"Wait a bit, Varley, until I can strike a light," came the musical notes of the woman road-agent. "I thought it best not to run any risk. I'm naturally supposed to be too timid a creature to be opening my bedroom after dark, you know," ending with a low, mocking laugh.

"It's a risk, but I had to have a talk, and it can't come any too soon!" in guarded but uneasy if not frightened tones.

"I know—you made a botch of it. How under the canopy you could, after all was so carefully and fully arranged, blessed if I can think."

The candle was relighted, and as she spoke these words, the false Olive Tempest dropped on the edge of the bed, her dark eyes flashing, her red lips curling half in scorn, half in anger, as she gazed into the pale face of the tall gambler.

With a swift, passionate movement, Judd Varley caught her in his arms, pressing his lips to hers almost fiercely. She made no effort to escape, quietly submitting until, as though ashamed of his outburst, Varley released her, drawing back a trifle as she coldly uttered:

"Don't be a bigger fool than nature intended, Varley. Time for gum-sucking when the trail is clear before us. Business, my man."

"All right, little woman," with real or assumed relief. "Glad to find you so sensible. I expected to see you boiling over like a kettle of hot water."

"There's no time for that. You lost the Bi-Bracer?"

"If I did, his master found him!" with a short, grim laugh.

"You're sure he's dead, then?"

"You know Dick Mann. He said he'd sent his steel home. And then the river; wounded, if not slain outright—Bah! Gypsy Gale will never turn up to bother us, be sure of that. I only wish I was as positive about the girl."

"The queen is dead—long live the queen!" laughed the false heiress softly, not the slightest trace of guilt or remorse to be read in her face, eyes or tones. "I'll answer for her. No doubt her body is held in the wreck. And even if ever it comes to light—am I not here? Haven't we two-score solid witnesses ready to swear they helped draw me up out of the drink? Won't Grizzly swear that I'm the fair passenger who bore him company until the road-agents stopped the stage? Well—that disposes of any corpse."

"I'm hoping it'll never come to light, for all that."

"That goes without saying. But back to

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business. You lot Gypsy Gale cheat the rope. You failed to get a grip on his papers, of course!"

Judd Varley gloomily nodded his head.

"It will take finer playing, but I reckon we can manage without them, since we have to. What is your best idea, honey?"

"Will it do for you to recover from the shock of your frightful adventure before several days, think?" with a low laugh.

"It's wonderful what nerve I have—or would be, if everybody isn't to soon learn that I am the daughter of my father; and he none other than the Big Bracer himself!" echoing that mocking laugh, though in too low a key to reach beyond the walls of that little chamber.

"Yet—I've sent sharp eyes and sure hands to look for the carcass along the river, lower down. If they find it, perhaps they'll find the papers on the carrion. If they do—and you prove your claims as his sole living relative?"

Queen Esther slowly shook her head in dissent.

"Who knows what he might have done before you hunted him down. Can you swear he didn't send off a letter before you jumped him? And if so—mightn't that bring some one here who knew the real Olive Tempest?"

"Is it likely?"

"Is it not possible?" was the swift retort. "I say yes! And so, we've got to change our programme a little. We've got to be satisfied with less boddle and more security."

"All Silver Lode knows he's dead, by this time. You're too scary, girl!" muttered Varley, with a dark scowl gathering on his face.

"Am I? What of that infernally cool sport who knocked Matson cold and snapped the neck of Ben Hurley? Who's to say he won't make more trouble for us all? He said he was hunting for the Big Bracer. To lock horns with him over the papers, he claimed, but who knows he wasn't lying? Do you? Can you swear that he isn't an old friend of Gale's? Can you go bail he doesn't know the girl herself?"

Swiftly, earnestly she spoke, growing pale as she recalled the cool sport who had so thoroughly bothered her men on the night before. And Judd Varley was disagreeably impressed by this new complication, against which he had made no provisions.

"If he ever finds his way to Silver Lode, there's enough to put a stopper on his tongue, I reckon."

"And so kick up a still louder racket? That won't wash, Varley," and she spoke with still firmer decision. "Better half a loaf than no bread at all. Better nine-tenths of the Big Bracer's pile than not to finger a red—with a rope in the background, maybe!"

"I'll never give up the game, after playing it this far!"

"Nor I, you owl-eyed darling," laughed the woman, her arms about his neck, her warm lips pecking at his cheek daintily as she whispered: "We'll strike while the iron is hot, and get in our pretty work before this wild and woolly thoroughbred can drop on our little game."

"But how? That's what I can't see into, just yet!"

"I'm Olive Tempest, sole daughter and heiress to Gypsy Gale, as the good people of Silver Lode knew him best. I never suspected what a terribly wicked old rascal this precious parent of mine was, until you gently, tenderly, honestly broke the ice, all for my own good, you know, honey!" laughing softly as her warm cheek was pressed close against his face.

"And then—"

"Do you begin to see, honey? Have I opened a shaft big enough to let light through that thick pate of yours, at last?"

"You mean to play the penitent, on his account?"

"To play—you have hit it, precisely, honey! To play them all for suckers! To play them such a trick as their smartest man never even dreamed of! And if you do your part, honey, we can snap our fingers at all the sports in Christendom!"

A faint sound startled them, just then, and Queen Esther quickly extinguished the light. Then, in hurried whispers she more fully explained her meaning to the eagerly-listening gambler, who expressed his full approval by a hearty hug, then stole silently out of the chamber.

CHAPTER XXVI.

JUDD VARLEY PAVES THE WAY.

It was late that night before slumber reigned over Silver Lode. The citizens had so much to talk over!

The suicide of Todd Undermill. The flight and death of Gypsy Gale. The death of more than one of their own number. The attempted robbery of the stage, ending in its death-leap over Satan's Elbow. The marvelous escape of the fair passenger from a frightful death.

Little wonder, then, that couches were neglected until a late hour.

Nor was the whole of the next day long enough for the citizens to talk the various subjects threadbare, particularly as it got wind that the fair passenger was none other than the sole living relative of the Big Bracer!

That, with her probable course in regard to the property which Gypsy Gale had been forced to leave behind him, was enough to furnish one solid week's discussion!

Some were out looking for the bodies of Dick Mann and the Big Bracer, though they were fated to meet with complete disappointment. Beyond a reasonable doubt, both bodies had been caught in an eddy which sunk and fastened them in among the rocks with which the river-bed was lined so thickly.

Judd Varley was very busy, too, though after a different fashion. He secured a long interview with the lady, from which he came with grave, earnest face. And when, just after supper, word spread that the citizens were expected to assemble in the open space before the hotel, be sure there was no need of force to make them attend.

Material for a respectable bonfire had been collected, and as the torch was applied, and the ruddy light began to spread around, Judd Varley leaped upon a big box which a thoughtful hand had provided for the occasion, lifting one white hand to command both attention and silence.

"Gentlemen," he said, his tones clear, grave, full of impressiveness; "I ask your kind attention for a few minutes. I'm nothing of a public speaker, and if what I have to say simply concerned myself, I'd hunt up some other way of getting at your ears."

"Better bore then chaw 'em, I'm howlin'!"

Varley paused until the laughter which greeted this whimsical assertion died away of itself, then he resumed:

"It's no matter for jesting, gentlemen, and I hope you'll be white enough to listen without trying to play the fool."

"That shets me up, boss! It's your make it—I'm friz out!"

"You'll be stiffer than freezing can make you, if you chip in again without leave, my fine fellow!" sharply cried the tall gambler, his face stern as his voice, his gray eyes flashing dangerously. "I'm here to talk to you about an important matter o' business. I'm acting as mouthpiece for a lady, who is feeling too ill, too badly shaken, too utterly heart-sick—God bless her!—to utter the generous sentiments in her own person. And as that lady's representative—"

"Go on, boss! We'll set down on the fu'st galoot as says a word!"

Judd Varley smiled grimly. The ice was fairly broken, and he knew that strict order would be enforced from this time on. He had chosen his opening words right well!

"The majority of you are by this time aware that the lady whom we were favored enough to rescue from what seemed certain death, is none other than Miss Tempest, the daughter and last living relative of the person whom we have known for so long as Gypsy Gale."

Though no words were distinguishable, an ugly muttering came from the outskirts of the assembly at that name. Judd Varley frowned a bit, but spoke up sharply:

"I know what you are thinking, and I'm glad to see you have manhood enough to bite off your words ruther than spit them out to shame and pain a lady! And to show how right you are in that—listen!"

"You know I've been talking for a long time with Miss Tempest. It was by her own request, for she had caught some careless words which some fellow with more tongue than brains had let drop near enough for a daughter to hear how her loved parent was regarded. And—it was the toughest deal of my life, gentlemen!" his voice unsteady for a moment as though the memory still unnerved him. "The lady insisted on my telling her everything I knew concerning Gypsy Gale!"

Again that inarticulate muttering, but this time it expressed mingled wonder and admiration.

"You're right, gentlemen," bowed Varley, who seemed gifted with the power to read their thoughts through their faces. "It was little short of heroic in the poor child—I beg her pardon for the familiarity! But—you know what we all thought of the father. You know that he was a conscienceless scoundrel from the ground up. You know that, after I read the letter left behind by poor Todd Undermill, I joined in the hunt for Gypsy Gale. You know that I tried my level best to bring him to the rope which his crimes had so richly merited.

"You know all this, gentlemen, but when I listened to that poor, heart-broken child—when I saw her eyes weeping tears bitterer than the salt seas—when I made out what a generous sacrifice she had so firmly determined upon—it knocked me clean out of the ring! And in the truth, the honesty, the purity of the daughter, I forgot the sins of the parent!"

A low cheer broke forth as the tall gambler paused to moisten his lips and catch his breath after this passionate speech. He bowed his recognition, and a smile crept into his cool-gray eyes. For he knew that his ends were surely gained. All that remained was to clinch it.

"After all, the grave covers all, and Gypsy Gale has cashed in for the last time. As he is dead, let's try the best we know how to forget

his past sins. As for myself, I would not have opened the subject at all, only for Miss Tempest."

"She asked me to make this little talk. She begged me to tell you one and all that, up to her arrival at Silver Lode, she had not even the ghost of an idea how the Big Bracer really made his money. He had never given her the slightest hint as to the truth. She thought him a mine-owner, whose fortune came directly out of the earth, not by way of the card-table, through other men's pockets!"

"It was hard to make her comprehend everything, she was so innocent, so ignorant of what an evil man can do. More than once I tried to get out of it before the end, but—well, you know how a woman can twist a man about her fingers," with a faint laugh.

"When we parted, she knew all I could tell her about the Big Bracer and his little schemes. And I—gentlemen, I knew more about what a pure-hearted woman is capable of than I ever dreamed in all my life."

"Are we to take it on trust, pardner?" ventured one of the company.

"You might, but you don't have to! Miss Tempest made me agree to tell you everything, and now I've shown you something of how it come about, I'll string the rest of my cards, face up, for all to look at."

"You know Gypsy Gale took all his papers with him. But you all know what property he left here and whereabouts. I know, and I gave a list of them to Miss Tempest. And she—now you've got it, gentlemen."

"She said, with tears filling her eyes, but with a voice as firm as ever the grittiest man owned, that she took charge of everything as a sort of sacred trust. Not from Gypsy Gale, mind you. She never gave him a thought when she said that, I'll go bail."

"She said that until the past was made clear, and every wrong fully righted, she would never know a peaceful moment. She begged me to lend her what aid lay in my power toward getting at the bottom facts in every case. She begged me, when I refused to take such a great responsibility on my lone shoulders, to see that the citizens were fully informed as to her firm resolve, so that they might help her choose good and true men to aid her in clearing the name she bore from even the slightest trace of robbery."

"Then, you don't mean to say that she intends to restore all the winnings of the Big Bracer?" cried an amazed voice from the crowd.

"Not quite that, but just as good to all square men," with a short laugh as he added: "I mean that she declares she will settle up the estate as rapidly as possible, turning it all into money, even at a sacrifice, and then restore every dollar that Gypsy Gale won by anything like trickery! Isn't that enough for any square man to ask? Isn't that ten-fold more than any one man in all Silver Lode would do if chance had put him into the position this lady now occupies?"

"You bet it is!"

"A snow-drift'd sell fer a coal-mine 'longside that."

"Whooray fer the little leddy, an' split yer lungs, mates!"

Those were the leading cries, but all the rest was drowned in the wild chorus of cheers and yells which followed, fairly making the hotel quiver on its foundations.

And though he knew all this was started by his cunningly posted henchmen, Judd Varley smiled proudly, for he felt assured that his bold schemes were secure beyond the possibility of failure after this.

Silence followed his uplifted hand as though it were a magic wand, but before he could speak he saw that this was caused, not by his act, but that of another. In the door of the hotel stood the false heiress, looking wan, worn, pale as a corpse, her hand also uplifted.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A HEART-BROKEN DAUGHTER.

INSTANTLY the hat of the handsome gambler came off, with a mute confession that he felt unworthy to stand covered in such a presence.

His henchmen, ever taking their cue from their chief, promptly imitated his action, and almost ere the human eye could note the fact, not a single head remained covered in all that crowd.

A small item, it is true, but mention of it is made simply to show how thoroughly Judd Varley had paved the way for what was next on the programme. If they were playing a game as evil as it was audacious, the plotters were playing it for all it was worth, and showed that they could change their line of battle right in the face of the enemy without betraying their own weakness or missing a single point.

As silence fell over the crowd, the false Olive Tempest lowered her hand, to press it tightly over her heart. She leaned her head for an instant against the door-casing, like one whose emotions were overpowering, and whose strength had been too highly estimated.

"Her heart's bigger than her body—poor, suffering child!" Judd Varley cried compassionately, as he sprung from the box and bastened

to lend her his support, only to be motioned back by that little white hand, as its owner drew her lithe, rounded figure erect unaided.

"No, dear sir," she uttered, and faint though her voice seemed to nearly every one within its compass, it was remarkable how clearly each word was made out on the street. "You are kind, but—I must learn to depend on myself now."

It was simply the perfection of acting, and even those who were behind the curtain felt strangely impressed as they watched and listened. Surely the poor, bereaved creature must feel something of what she so truthfully conveyed to the minds of others?

Judd Varley stood with bowed head before her, only the low flight of steps between them. And his voice was plainly unsteady as he said:

"I have done your bidding, Miss Tempest, to the best of my poor ability. I have told these gentlemen—"

"Oh, how they must hate and execrate even my name!" almost wailed the young woman, wringing her hands as they rose almost in a praying position, her pallid face betraying pain, grief and meek humility.

Judd Varley flashed a fiery glance over his shoulder, one hand mechanically moving to his hip where hung his faithful weapon, as though he asked nothing better than to clap eyes on mortal cruel and base enough to cast a slur in the direction of this noble creature.

"Even you—even you avert your face from—nay!" with a sudden alteration of tone and manner, drawing her lithe, graceful figure proudly erect as one hand checked the confused protest which leaped to his lips at this misconstruction. "Do not say it—do not add to the burning shame and heart-broken pain I am now suffering—do not perjure yourself in your generosity, but—"

As though moved by an impulse beyond her power to resist, Queen Esther brushed past the tall gambler and sprung upon the box, her dark eyes reflecting back the fire-light, twin spots of hectic leaping into her pale cheeks. With one arm extended in a gesture which was commanding and supplicatory at one and the same time, she passionately cried:

"As high Heaven records my words, gentlemen, I have had no willing share in this sad and sinful business! I never fer even a moment suspected that my—my father, was or could be other than the truest, purest, most honorable of all living men! If I had—"

"We would not believe it, even from your own lips, Miss Tempest," calmly interposed Varley, as her voice suddenly choked.

He strode forward as he uttered the words and stood close beside the box, facing the silent, awed gathering. His right hand gripped the butt of a revolver. His face was white and hard-set, his eyes seeming like balls of fire as they roved restlessly over those faces. But his voice was soft and gravely respectful as he added:

"If you must speak, Miss Tempest, all will afford you a silent and respectful hearing. I have told them all, as I promised you. They know that not even the shadow of wrong-doing attaches to you."

"And yet—he was my father!" piteously came the words. "He was so kind, so loving, so thoughtful, so generous—with stolen money, as I am now to hear for the first time!" her manner again changing with that bewildering abruptness. "Is it not so? Is not that the *real* meaning of the title you gave him? Does not 'the Big Bracer' mean that?"

"It was only a figure of speech, ma'am, and ought not to worry you in the least," stammered Judd Varley, seeming all taken aback.

"So you told me before, but—" turning again to the crowd in front, to add: "Tell me, some one of you—you, if you please, sir!" and her finger indicated the grizzled rascal who had given the signal from the stage to let the spy in the tree-top know that their game was aboard.

Grizzly shuffled uneasily from one foot to the other, scratching his head as he dubiously eyed the tall gambler and his weapon.

"You hear? Do as the lady bids, can't you?" sharply uttered the sport, reading this look aright.

"Waal, I'll do the best I know how, mum, ef they ain't no slicker jaw at your service than mine; but I'm mighty dub'us you'll hardly—"

"To the point, you idiot!" growled Varley, menacingly.

"A brace game is a skin game, mum, an' runs flat ag'inst what we call a squar' game. Means spring-box in faro, with sech side dishes as strippers, rounds, tie-ups, sand-ers, odd keerd, an' a dozen other bank tricks like them. An' the man that runs sech a combination is called 'runnin' a brace.' Which kin be b'il'd down like this: brace, bracer, big bracer, bracer-on-wheels; Big Bracer!"

Almost startlingly pale, save for those twin red spots on her cheeks, "Olive Tempest" listened to this glib explanation, which was no doubt much clearer to her trained brain than it would have been to the real heiress whose name and identity she had so daringly stolen. And

for a single breath the truth thus conveyed seemed to crush her under its weight of shame and humiliation.

Her head bowed, her tightly clasped hands rose tremblingly to her bosom for a moment, then covered her face as though to hide from all curious eyes a daughter's pure blushes for a parent's shame.

"The ledgy made me say it, boss!" whimpered Grizzly, shrinking from that dangerous glow in the gambler's gray eyes.

"I know—or I'd have clipped your tongue with a bullet before you got half through! And you, men of Silver Lode!" his tones ringing out in clear, cold, yet burning resolution. "From this time on I'm backing Miss Tempest. Any word, look, act that can bring her pain, will be promptly avenged by me. You know me, gentlemen, and you can fill out this skeleton speech at your leisure!"

"And I, gentlemen—I beg of you to believe me when I say that just as I was innocent of wrong, so I swear to make all the amends that lies in my power!" cried the false heiress, with another of her swift changes. "I ask no defenders, for I mean to act so honestly that not even the lowest-minded among all within sound of my voice this evening can find cause or excuse for a single sneer or slur!"

"We know that, Miss Tempest," gravely, gently interposed Varley, who seemed desirous of ending the scene without further delay. "There is not a soul in all Silver Lode but what has or will have implicit faith in your sincerity; as for doubting your perfect innocence, I can assure you that has never once entered into the most suspicious mind. And now—this is trying your strength too severely. Permit me—"

"Not yet—I cannot—I must make my position perfectly clear, while I have time and strength! Heaven knows if—if another day will find me alive or—sane!"

An involuntary shiver ran through the gathering at that conclusion. It seemed so likely! And more than one then present began to wonder if, indeed, that dread calamity had not already overtaken the poor, heart-broken daughter of Big Bracer!

With a visible struggle against her powerful emotions, the young woman seemed to gain a temporary victory, and as though fearing for her own strength, she spoke rapidly:

"Never once did I even dream that there was any taint of crime or wrong on the name I bear, gentlemen! Even yet I can hardly believe what I so sadly fear is the bitter, black, shameful truth! Even now I would hurl the terrible accusations into the face of those who dared to utter them, only—only for the truly merciful firmness with which this gentleman—may heaven reward him for his services, for I, a poor weak, broken-hearted orphan can never hope to do so!"

Her right hand gently rested on the bowed head of Judd Varley as she brokenly, huskily uttered those words. And, as if unconsciously, her hand remained there while she added:

"Only for him I would never have believed my poor father could have fallen so low! Only for him, I fear I would never have found the strength to speak to you all as I am now trying to speak.

"It was all so sudden, so utterly unexpected! When his kind, loving letter reached me, asking me to part with my good friends there in my far Eastern home and hasten to join him—how was I to dream of the heart-sickening revelations which awaited me? If I had never escaped from that frightful wreck! If death had forever sealed my eyes, then!"

"Business—don't pile it on too thick!" muttered Varley, barely loud enough for her trained ears to decipher his meaning.

"And yet—why should I say that?" drawing her bowed figure proudly erect, her dark eyes flashing vividly, her tones clear and distinct. "I should be thankful that I am still alive, if only that I may clear the name I bear from all stain—and I am glad!"

"Gentlemen—men of Silver Lode! I ask your kind assistance in doing this. I beg of you to aid me as far as lies in your power. I ask you to elect one of your number to serve as the representative of all those who can bring even the shadow of a claim against my father. Mr. Varley has consented to act as my representative. He can consult with the man of your choice, and fix on a third member to complete the trustees. Then—when I have sold all the property left by the man you have known as the Big Bracer, I'll discharge every claim pronounced just by those three gentlemen!"

"What's the matter with Bark Matson fer choice?" cried out a ready henchman, to have his words caught up and spread through the crowd by his partners, according to instructions.

"I do not know the gentleman you name, but I accept him as your legal representative, men of Silver Lode!" promptly cried the false heiress, giving no time for another nomination, which might seriously interfere with their hidden plans. "And now—if I have made clear my sincere wish to—to make what amends—for a—my—"

Her voice grew choked, one hand rose to her throat as though to relieve a sickening suffocation, and her lithe, graceful figure swayed dizzily on the improvised rostrum.

"Keep back!" thundered Judd Varley, as the crowd began to surge forward to lend their aid.

His strong arms received the apparently fainting form, and carrying his fair burden with as much seeming ease as though only a feather-weight, the tall gambler passed up the broad steps to the door of the hotel.

Here with a faint, hysterical laugh, the cunning actress freed herself, pausing to wave one white hand toward the completely captivated crowd, then lifting the right hand of the gambler to her lips with a pretty air of devotion, for it seemed more than mere thankfulness!

A wild cheer went up from the gathering at this touching tableau, and under its cover Queen Esther hastily muttered:

"Cinch the nail started by the boys right off, honey! If we can make them believe Bark is their real choice, the whole game is in our own hands, and good as won!"

"I'll do my level best, be sure, little woman!" laughed Varley, in turn bowing over her hand.

This she quickly withdrew, then passed from view of the cheering crowd into the dark passage leading to the second story. She tripped lightly up the flight, secure from observation, as she knew, and gained the chamber assigned her. Entering, she struck a match and lit a lamp, starting back with a gasping cry as she caught sight of Hart Oakes leaning easily on the foot rail of the narrow bed!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

PLAIN LANGUAGE FROM HEART O' OAK.

"EVENING, ma'am! Do you know, you're a mighty sight prettier than I had any idea of, when I saw you last!"

If so, the Thoroughbred Sport must have formed a very unfavorable opinion of her facial charms on the occasion so coolly alluded to, for Queen Esther was anything but a beauty just then.

The wholly unexpected appearance drove every drop of blood from her face, leaving it actually ghastly in its sickening pallor. Her age seemed doubled in an instant. There were wrinkles in her face, and crows' feet about her eyes. Even her lithely-rounded figure seemed to shrink and lose its youthful perfection.

"You—here—" she gasped, hoarsely, one hand rising to her bosom as though in quest of a deadly weapon as she shrunk away from that recklessly smiling fellow.

"Here—in your chamber, my dear," purred the sport, making no effort to check her hand, though he must have divined the impulse which moved it. "What a commotion it would make if anything should happen to betray the fact that I was here—say, through your invitation!"

It was a risky play, but the thoroughbred had made no error in his judgment. That hand faltered, the woman shrunk still further away.

"I never—what do you mean?" she faltered, in low, husky tones.

"To have a finger in the rich pie, or kick over the dish for good and all, my sweetness," was the cool response. "If you'd rather starve than to see me have a bite, just sound your clarion for the company below, and call it a go!"

"I—I don't understand your meaning, sir," she faltered.

Never before in all her life had she felt so utterly unnerved as in this emergency. It came so close upon what she had considered a complete and final victory. And now—

Her bewildered brain began to work again, and she fancied she saw a way through this fresh tangle. Yet, shaken as were her nerves, she managed to avoid betraying her change of base, too abruptly.

The deliberate moves of the sport gave her time enough for this, though he was probably ignorant of the chance he was allowing to slip through his fingers.

He moved out from the narrow space at the foot of the bed, taking the one chair which the chamber afforded, nodding airily toward the couch as he purred softly:

"I beg of you don't stand on ceremony, my dear. Pray be seated, and I will try to enlighten your dulled comprehension. You have nothing to fear from me—as long as you treat me white!"

With a little gasp she sank on the edge of the bed, passing a trembling hand across her eyes as though unable to comprehend what they only too plainly revealed.

"I do not—why do you treat me thus?" a sudden touch of indignation coming into her voice, though it was still very faint and guarded. "Why do you intrude—I have done you no harm!"

"You play it mighty slick, ma'am," with an approving nod and smile.

"Who are you? Are you mad? Leave me this instant, or I'll summon assistance to punish you as this shameful insolence deserves."

"Call me Heart o' Oak, for lack of a better title, deary, and—Come, my beauty of the highway!" and his voice grew cold and men-

acing as he leaned forward, his arms supported on the back of the chair, one forefinger slowly quivering before her face as he spoke: "Business is business, and I'm its prophet! You held the deck night before last, and I had to pay the footing. It's my turn now, and if you try to jump the game before I get square, I'll break you all up!"

"He's mad—I must humor him until help can come!" murmured the woman, barely above her breath, then adding in clearer tones: "I'm sure I'm more than ready to make what reparation lies in my power if you have suffered loss on my—my account, good sir. If my poor father—"

"Did you ever have one?" in mock surprise. "I reckoned you came down from Heaven in a hand-basket!"

"He certainly is a lunatic!" murmured the woman, affecting to hide a fresh tremor of fear, catching her breath with a little gasp.

Hart Oakes laughed softly, something like admiration coming into his big blue eyes. Evil as he knew this woman was, he could give her full credit for the remarkable nerve she showed, as well as her powers of acting a part. But then he spoke still more bluntly:

"It's good, but not good enough, my dear. Try to remember that I've been squarely behind the scenes, and that I know every inch of the crooked trail your dainty little feet are treading. Try to fix in your mind the fact that I had quite a chat with you a couple of nights ago, when you saw fit to mask your charms in a cloak and don't-talk-about-'ems!"

"I surely must summon aid!" still in that faint aside.

"If you must, of course I'll not kick. But—I wouldn't call for Judd Varley to lead the rescuing party, if I thought as much of him as you appear to do. Because—well, he might find it a harder job than even bringing back to life a murdered heiress!"

Despite her remarkable nerve, Queen Esther started at those last words, turning fairly ghastly as she gasped:

"What do you—what do you mean by that?"

"Simply enough to let you know I saw the whole trick turned, my darling," smiled Oakes, showing his teeth slightly. "Shall I speak even plainer before you face your hand, little woman?"

With a desperate effort of will, Queen Esther conquered the dizzy illness which nearly overcame her at this terrible hint. She even forced a smile to her livid lips before replying:

"I am only a poor, weak, defenseless girl. I cannot throw you out of my room, as I would like. And if I were to call for help—"

"You would be terribly compromised, of course, so never give that a thought, my pretty daisy dipped in dew! And, as a side issue, such a row might seriously interfere with your reaping the harvest in your stolen character of Miss Olive Tempest, sole heiress to Gypsy Gale, the Big Bracer! And that would be too bad—especially as I mean to have my modest share of the pickings."

"Once more, sir, I declare that I don't understand one item of all you pretend to string before me!" frowned the woman, desperately fighting against defeat, though she knew her dangerous secret was surely discovered by this man, all the more hard to deal with from his reckless coolness.

"If you wore the trowsers still, I'd say you were lying. As it is, let me do some more explaining," easily retorted the sport. "You are the person who led the gang that held me up on the trail, night before last. You are the one who set Ben Hurley on me, bidding him make his title good by breaking my neck. Your men chased me half that night, and finally led to my running up against Gypsy Gale himself."

Hart Oakes laughed softly as the woman gave an involuntary start at those words. But without waiting for her to speak, he resumed:

"I helped the Big Bracer stand off Judd Varley and his gang, that night and the next day. He took a fancy to my style and—you can see here how he tried to reward me for my help," abruptly breaking off to take a piece of paper from his bosom and holding its characters under the light of the lamp.

Almost mechanically Queen Esther glanced over the few lines of writing, signed by the hand of the man whom she was now claiming as a parent, but she made no sign. Cold and icy calm she gazed into those keen blue eyes as though still in the darkness.

Hart Oakes replaced the bill of sale in his bosom, then added:

"That bit of paper contains my terms, ma'am. If I'm given undisputed possession of the Cap-sheaf, to do with it as I will, I'll never lay a single straw in your way from this on. If not—"

"Are you trying to bribe me to defraud the rightful owners of the property my poor father left behind him, sir? Do you dare—"

"Don't jump at a conclusion, my dear," was the curt interposition. "I'll never dare threaten you. I couldn't be so awfully rude to a woman. But—try to deny my claim to the Cap-sheaf, and I reckon your partners in the game will find it a mighty hard road to travel over!"

"If your claim is a righteous one, sir, be sure it will never be disputed by me," was the cold, firm response. "Present it to the gentlemen elected to administer Stuart Tempest's estate, and take your chances with the rest. I can make you no other offer than this."

"Not even if I blow the whole truth of how that accident to the stage occurred? Not even if I swear that I saw two women go over Satan's Elbow, but only one come up? And she by the same means as she went over the brink? Not even then?" sneered the sport, mockingly, yet with his blue eyes glowing like heated steel as they keenly watched the pale face of the desperate woman opposite.

"Now I know you are either drunk or crazy! Now I know that you have no just claim on the mine, and I'll fight you to the bitter—"

"Don't be quite so sure, little one. What if I bring proof? What if I can produce—*Steady, Judd Varley!*" he cried sternly, a revolver filling his hand and covering the bosom of Queen Esther, just as the door behind him swung open at a gentle touch. "I've got her lined! If you kick up a row, we'll go to Heaven together!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN ARMED TRUCE.

SOMETHING like a moan of despair fluttered the lips and agitated the bosom of the woman who had entered upon such a bold and perilous game. She visibly shrank from this grim muzzle which almost brushed her dress over her heart as it came so swiftly into position, but she saw no possible chance to disarm this thoroughbred or to escape his immediate revenge in case the worst was attempted.

Was it pure instinct that warned the sport of coming danger? Was the foul fiend standing his friend? Surely her eyes had not betrayed the vicious hope which found birth in her brain as she saw the knob of her door slowly, silently turning, and the door gently opening?

"Excuse my back, pardner," added Heart o' Oak, never once glancing toward the partly opened door, never for an instant removing his keen eyes from Queen Esther, and keeping the muzzle of his revolver almost in contact with her bosom. "And, if it isn't too much trouble, come in or stay out, please. I never could endure a draught playing on my poor backbone, don't you know?"

"What the devil—"

"Bring him in with you, pardner, if you like; but just beg of him not to joggle my elbow the least mite, for—my finger is glued to a hair-trigger, and these cartridges have the most sensitive primers you ever saw! If I was to sneeze, even, I reckon they'd explode; and— That's a terrible old draught you let in past you, pardner!"

The instinct of the thoroughbred had not deceived him. The intruder was, indeed, none other than the tall gambler of Silver Lode, come to have a few parting words with his fair ally in the game for Gypsy Gale's millions.

He saw her light shining under her door, and knew that she was still up, probably awaiting his coming to complete the schemes they had so admirably put in motion that evening. And then he caught the cool, easy accents of a masculine voice, and the demon of jealousy leaped into his cruel heart.

His right hand gripped an ugly-looking blade as he silently tried the door, and already he felt the hot blood of his rival flowing under his avenging strokes, when—

Jealousy died, and fear for the woman whom he so passionately loved took its place. He no longer doubted her. There was no acting in her shrinking from that grim muzzle, no sham in her wild look of frightened appeal to him as his white face showed dimly through the partly opened door.

"Devil!" panted Varley, hoarsely. "Harm a hair of her head, and I'll cut your black heart out and ram it smoking down your throat!"

"Wouldn't it suit just as well to let it stay there in the first place, pardner?" lightly laughed the thoroughbred, evidently feeling himself master of the situation as long as he held Queen Esther under his thumb. "You might lose out some o' the works, and I'm almost sure you'd soil your white fingers trying it. So—pardner, if you love me and have the slightest regard for the feelings or pocket of mine host, do come in and shut that door! First you know, off'll go this roof on a sneeze, sailing to never-come-back-again! And—ma'am, can't you stoop so low as to condescend to coax him just a weenty bit?"

"He's got me fcul, Varley, but—"

"Time's up, pardner," and that cool mockery instantly gave place to grim sternness. "I'm old business on ten wheels. Come around where I can see your sweet mug, and come mighty peaceable, unless you're really anxious to wear crape on your tile!"

There was no mistaking his earnestness, and with a new, shivering dread of death, the woman silently implored the tall gambler to submit.

"Put it into plain talk, ma'am, and I reckon it'll fetch him in a bigger hurry," said Hart Oakes, reading aright that despairing light in her dark eyes. "Tell him that you can see the plumbago spitting on its hands and getting ready for an investigating tour through your

sentimental region, and that—of course you will, ma'am."

"Give in, Varley," she faltered, vainly striving to keep her tones steady. "He's the devil himself!"

"And therefore a jolly good friend to all two both o' ye, if you only have grace to own up as much," laughed Oakes, as Judd Varley came suddenly past his elbow, to turn with a black frown as he gained the side of his confederate. "Good evening, Varley! Hope I see you enjoying yourself. Sit down, I beg of you! And—until we've got our little title all clear for reading, please fold your bands in your lap."

It was a bitter pill for the gambler to swallow, but there was an ugly menace lurking under this careless ease, and he was man of the world enough to recognize as much. His knife dropped upon the bed, and with his fingers tight locked in each other, he sat down close beside Queen Esther. Then he muttered:

"What sort of game is this, anyway?"

"You thought it must be 'cut-throat,' I reckon, pardner," lightly laughed the thoroughbred, with a quick nod toward the bare blade. "Well, it may turn into that before the night is old, unless I can find more solid reason in you than I did in your wi—lady friend here!"

"She is my friend, and if you have dared to injure or insult her by word or deed, you rascal, I'll have your life in pay!"

"Draw it mild, pardner," and with marvelous deftness a second revolver came into play, covering the tall gambler with the steadiness of fate. "I've treated her like I would my own sweetheart, and what more can any girl ask?"

It was playing with fire, but the sport appeared to enjoy the sensation far more than either of his enforced companions. And as though fearing a rash outburst on the part of her friend, Queen Esther hurriedly uttered:

"I'm all right, Varley, but—tell him what you told me, you glib-tongued rascal," with vixenish sharpness, as her dark eyes flashed back to the face of the thoroughbred.

"Yours to command, ma'am," with a slight bow. "I never could resist fair women, especially when they tote such a winning way about with them as—excuse me!" nodding again, as Queen Esther made an impatient gesture. "You are averse to compliments—when your hu—gentleman friend is near enough to take 'em in, is it?"

"Don't rub it in too deep, unless you're the fool your chatter leads me to think," coldly muttered Varley, his eyes glowing viciously.

"All right. We'll get down to solid business, if you've fairly learned the little lesson I resolved to teach the moment I heard you come spying and eavesdropping on a private party."

"Of your selection, why don't you add?" flashed Queen Esther.

"My selection goes, then," with a brisk nod. "And now—business clean through! I reckon I've shown you both that I'm fully competent to hold up my end of the whirly-gig. But I don't care to rub it in, unless I have to. And so—shall we call it an armed truce, Varley?"

"Who are you? What is your business here?"

"Call me anything but Dennis; make it Eli, if you will! As for what I'm hunting—just a weenty mouthful out of the rich pie you two are about to pull out of the oven. No more, no less. Is it a whack?"

Judd Varley turned a shade whiter at these brisk sentences, and his gray eyes sought the face of his confederate as though in search of a hint which would show him how to answer. But before he could read that hard, anxious look, Oakes interposed:

"Eyes front, if you please, pardner! It's your play, not hers."

"Tell me who and what you are, or I'll call the house to—"

"Get thrown out of the window!" laughed Oakes, then sharply adding: "I'll tell you, but first—let me warn you that even if you should get away with me, which I hardly believe you can do, I've elected another hungry candidate for that bit of pie. In still plainer words, I've not run my head into the noose without making sure of getting square in the end."

"Clear as mud!" frowned Varley.

"I knew you two, and I knew that you were playing a game that you wculdn't lose for simply one life like mine. And so I made my will before coming here. I put it into the hands of my executor, and he'll lose no time in administering on my effects if the occasion arises."

"All of which means?" sneered Varley.

"That you'd a heap sight better have me for a friend and partner—in a modest way, of course, since you set the game rolling; but still a partner. You can tell him of the paper I showed you, my dear," with a cool nod toward Queen Esther. "It's too much trouble to flash it out again, and both my hands are full, just now!"

"He showed me what claimed to be a bill of sale, conveying to him a mine called the Cap-sheaf. I believe it purported to be signed by my poor, dead father."

"Not exactly, my dear," coolly corrected the sport. "It was signed by Stuart Tempest, better known as Gypsy Gale, the Big Bracer."

"And this is Miss Olive Tempest, daughter and sole heiress of that same gentleman, sir," sharply cut in Varley.

"That's what pretty much all Silver Lode believes, but—come to my terms, or I'll show them just how the wool is over their eyes!"

CHAPTER XXX.

IN ON THE GROUND FLOOR.

With a grating curse, Judd Varley made an impulsive movement, only to be checked by the quick clutch of Queen Esther's hand on his arm.

"Just in time to save a cartridge, my dear," nodded the thoroughbred, with a glimpse of his white teeth through his mustaches. "And now that the ice is fairly broken—now that you seem to appreciate the bulge I've got on you both—suppose we make things look just a weenty bit more cheerful?"

Rising to his feet, he replaced his revolvers in their cases. He stepped backward to the door, slipping the catch, then resumed his seat, after turning the chair around to face the troubled confederates.

"I don't want to kick up a row if I can get my whack without it, you see," he nodded, crossing one leg over the other in careless ease. "I've got you foul, and if you don't know it already, I'm willing to labor with you until your understanding is fairly enlightened to the truth in all its crooks and turns."

"There is a lady present. But if you will kindly step down-stairs with me, I'll try to answer you as your manner deserves," coldly, hardly uttered the tall gambler.

"With pleasure—when the articles of partnership are properly drawn up and signed!" laughed the thoroughbred; but then his manner abruptly changed, his voice growing cold and peremptory: "Business first, Judd Varley! You're not near so blind as you try to make out. You know that I've dropped to your little game, and that sooner or later you've got to meet my terms or lose all you're playing for. And that would break you all up—to say nothing of the rope!"

"I know that you are either drunk or crazy—if not both!"

"Just what the lady declared; but as I convinced her, so I reckon I can convince you. And as a starter—how is this?"

"It was all a put-up job on the Big Bracer. While you were here in town working up the boys to lynch the fellow, this lady was rigged out in men's clothes, heading a gang in hiding along the stage-route, to guard against any chance of losing the Big Bracer. I know, for she held me up in prime style. And right there is where she made her big mistake, I'm happy to say."

"Go on. Each word you utter only serves to convince me you are drunk or insane."

"Two to one you'll change your tune before I finish," laughed the cool sport, in no wise disconcerted. "I'll not take the trouble to explain just how I contrived to shake your woman-pard and her outfit, for I'm open to lay long odds she's given you all she knows on that point, long before this. But I'll tell you something fresh, for a change."

"I lost myself in the hills, and stumbled on the Big Bracer. Or, to be more precise, he pulled me out of the drink, into which I fell by accident. He saved my life, and when I found it out, I tried my level best to even up the score. And that is why I chipped in when you run him down with your bloodhounds, Judd Varley! That was why I sent back the cartridge your spy slung at the old man. For it was a foul shot from cover at an unsuspecting cripple, and only the mercy of Heaven kept it from boring the skull it only grazed!"

"You killed him? Do you know what that would result in were I to repeat your confession to the crowd below?" sneeringly demanded Judd Varley.

"I know that you'll never let even a hint to that effect drop from your lips, pardner; and I'll tell you why, when I come to it," was the confident response. "As I said, I dropped your spy in his tracks, before you could fairly tell what he was cutting loose at. And I was with the Big Bracer in that hole all through the day. I was the one that kept you in play by stealing and using Gypsy Gale's voice while he was sleeping, to gain strength enough to escape, for his daughter's sake."

"For which I thank you, from the bottom of my heart!" murmured the false heiress, with dimmed eyes and clasped hands, still desperately clinging to the role she had assigned herself even in the face of utter defeat.

"Never mention it, my dear. I'd have done just the same if you'd never been born—for the old man's sake. And if he hadn't cashed in for good, I'd never be talking to you like this!" his face flushing, his blue eyes glowing vividly. "Instead—I'd have come to you with a noosed rope in my hand!"

"But that don't count," suddenly resuming his equable tones and easy manner once more. "Gypsy run up against Dick Mann, in the dark, and both of them tumbled off into the drink together to meet—"

He was interrupted by a mocking laugh from the tall gambler.

"You haven't learned your lesson well enough, stranger! Dick Mann lived long enough to tell us how the Big Bracer came by his death!"

"Did you see the worthy Richard after the accident? Didn't you simply take the voice that answered you back as proof sufficient? Have you forgotten that, just before you got your torches burning, there came a yell and a mighty splash in the drink? Well, I owned that voice. I made that splash, by tossing a big rock into the river. And then, when you told Ginger Gore to send down one of his men to investigate, I lay in a hole in the wall, not ten feet above his head. I saw how you searched the canyon. I heard you tell the fellow on the trail to push upriver to make sure the Big Bracer had really left his den. I saw you come back—but what's the use? If I haven't convinced you that I know all about that night, you'll never own up!"

"Say you did, what then? Let Silver Lode learn as much, and they'll break their necks in trying to stretch yours."

"They'll never be any the wiser through either of you," was the cool retort. "But let me go on a bit further, and you can judge for yourselves. I'm not half-way through with my little yarn!

"Gypsy told me all he had to fear from you, as the head of the plots against him and his, Varley. He told me how you had forged a letter to bring his daughter to Silver Lode, though he never dreamed of the fate which you had actually planned for her.

"I always had a sneaking preference for the under dog in a fight, and that may be why I agreed to do all I knew how to fool you, Varley. It was because I promised this that Gale gave me a bill of sale to the Cap-sheaf Mine; you see, I'm facing each one of my cards!"

"When I gave that pledge, I meant to back it up for all I was worth, and if, after giving the river the shake, by daylight, I hadn't got lost in those infernal hills, I reckon I would have been in to balk your plans, sure! As it was—

"I found Satan's Ladder just in time to see the stage come down the upper stretch, full split! I was just in time to see a young woman with head and arms out of the window on the inner side of the trail, trying to open the door! And—I saw the whole thing pitch over Satan's Elbow!"

Despite himself Hart Oakes choked at that, though he never took his eyes from the ghastly pale visage of the tall gambler as he spoke.

In that face was plainly written his guilt. But still plainer was his suffocating rage at having that guilt discovered when he counted everything so secure!

"And I saw all that followed, lying close among the rocks above the Ladder," Oakes hastened to add. "I saw you, ma'am, strip off your cloak and mask—and I photographed your face on my brain then and there, so clearly that it will not fade out while life lasts! I saw you lowered over the wall by your men, who drew up the rope and gave the signal for which you, pardner, was watching at the foot of the Ladder! And then—shall I continue?"

"It's all a lie!" panted Varley, brushing the cold drops from his brow. "And—even if it contained a grain of truth, you'd never dare whisper it in Silver Lode, when I can swear you killed a lot of the citizens! As for the rest—we deny it, in toto!"

"I don't mean to whisper it in Silver Lode, unless you compel me to do so. But if you do—I can back my words with proofs sufficient to put a rope about even your dainty throat, my lady! Where is the body of the real Olive Tempest?"

Slowly, significantly he uttered the words, and he laughed softly as he noted the effect they produced. Terror—consternation—a complete breaking down of their audacious defiance!

"If I could bring the poor child back to life—if Gypsy Gale was not dead and gone—I'd cut off my tongue rather than permit it to form the words I'm about to utter," added the sport, resuming his cold, even manner of speech. "But they're past using gold, and I'm flat broken—thanks to you, my dear," with a short nod toward Queen Esther. "And—here it comes, pard!"

"Recognize my rights to the Cap-sheaf Mine. Do what you can to secure me full possession, backed by this bit of paper. And in return I'll chip in on your side, helping you to carry the neat little game to a successful termination. If not—then it's a no-mercy fight!"

"Give us time—to think—"

"Time goes," rising from his seat and reaching the door. "I'll call on you again, when I reckon you've made up your minds."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE PRICE OF A LIFE.

With a short, business-like nod, the Thoroughbred Sport opened the door and slipped through, closing the barrier silently. And then, as the two schemers listened intently, they

could trace his footsteps passing along to the head of the stairs, and even the first few steps down it.

But Queen Esther was not content with this. She sprung to the door and bent her ear in listening, holding up a finger in warning as her dark eyes flashed their light toward the tall gambler. And as the sounds came floating back from the stairs, she slipped from the room and glided swiftly, silently to the head of the flight, just in time to see Hart Oakes pause on the threshold to strike a match and light a cigar before passing across the platform to the street.

Thus satisfied that the dangerous factor in their bold game had left in good faith, the woman retraced her steps, meeting Judd Varley at her chamber door. He fell back as she advanced. She entered, shut the door, leaning against it as she gazed steadily, keenly into that handsome face for a brief space in utter silence.

"Well, little woman?"

"Is it well, Judd Varley? Has that cool devil left you any of your old grit? Dare you say with me—he's got to croak?"

Barely above her breath came the last words, but if she had screamed them forth at the top of her lungs, they could not have been more expressive. And as though her forced composure went with them, Queen Esther caught the gambler by the shoulders, her white fingers seeming to close with the vicious power of claws, her eyes fairly flashing into his as her breath came hotly to his face.

"Kill him—kill him, Judd Varley! Or—he'll swing us both!"

The tall gambler showed his teeth with an evil smile, his nerve apparently strengthening as hers seemed to decline.

"He's good as dead, little woman. He signed his own death-warrant when he faced his cards so boldly, without making us actually expose ours—without securing a safeguard in the shape of a written confession. But—"

"There must be no 'but' about it, man! There must be nothing left to chance! He's got to croak, if my own hand—Hark!"

There came the faint echo of footsteps on the stairs, and their first thought was that Hart Oakes had turned back to make sure his bold stroke could not be successfully parried. And it was this belief that led Judd Varley to hastily mutter:

"If it is, I'll down him, for keeps! We'll swear he tried to assault you, and I came to your aid!"

With cat-like steps he reached the foot of the bed, crouching in such a position that the opening door would momentarily hide him from the sight of any one crossing the threshold, and with ready knife he waited for the ending.

Quick, yet light, those footsteps came direct to the door of the chamber occupied by the two plotters, and then a signal sounded on the panel; first a light knocking, followed by a peculiar sound which can hardly be reproduced in print.

Judd Varley drew his breath sharply as he recognized the same signal which he had used in order to gain admission to the chamber, and a swift smile flashed across the lips of Queen Esther as she murmured barely above her breath:

"He's our tool! Back me up, and I'll sharpen his teeth!"

Judd Varley nodded assent, and the woman answered the signal, opening the door to grant admittance to the tall form of Bark Matson.

"Just the man I was going to send out for!" cried Queen Esther, closing the door and turning the key, then catching the hands of the newcomer in hers an eager, yet frightened light in her dark eyes as they met his steady gaze. "If you had only come—but no! What's to be done must be done without giving rise to talk such as that might breed, and—Matson, we can count on you in this great emergency?"

The tall road-agent gave a slight start at that pronoun, and a scowl flashed across his face as, for the first time, he noticed the presence of the handsome gambler. But the betrayal was brief as it was passionate, and then he stood once more the cold, hard, resolute man of the world.

"I'm ready for any sort of work, at any and all hours, Queenie, as none should know more surely than yourself," was his prompt response.

"I know, and yet—this may be worse than you guess, Bark!"

"Yet you say it must be done?"

"Or we're worse than ruined, man!" flashed the woman, with undisguised fierceness.

Bark Matson started, glancing swiftly yet keenly from face to face as though he hoped to get some clew there. In one fierce hatred mingled with fear; in the other naught but cold, inscrutable gravity.

"Give it a name, Queen Esther," he slowly muttered. "What's turned up since you left the crowd down yonder? You haven't been trying to put on the screws, Judd Varley?" and he flashed a fiery glance into the coldly handsome face of Silver Lode's pet gambler.

With the swift tact of a woman who knows what hot jealousy may so readily commit, Queen Esther slipped between the two men,

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forcing a laugh as she looked squarely into the speaker's dark face.

"He would, but I didn't dare let him, hot-head! Come—let's get down to a sober level, and talk it over in a purely business way."

With a playful push she sent Matson back to the bed, following him, and seating herself by his side, a motion of her hand bidding Varley occupy the single chair which the chamber could boast. Then, with her little hands toying as though unconsciously with the sinewy right hand of their intended dupe, Queen Esther hurriedly outlined the fresh peril which had so unexpectedly confronted them but a few minutes earlier.

"You know what sort of metal he is made of, Bark. You can guess how much trouble he can give us, even if all he swore to—about his proof, and his witnesses, you understand!—is a lie!"

"And you were here, Varley?" with just the shadow of a sneer in his tones, though it glowed plainly enough in his dark eyes.

The gambler quietly nodded toward the woman.

"Yes, it was my say-so, Matson," with a decisive little nod of her shapely head. "Any such row just now, and in here, would be too risky. You'd ought to see as much for yourself, man!"

"And you want me to bounce the fellow, of course?"

"Because you can do it without any one suspecting the truth. You can pick a quarrel with him, and no one will dream of connecting it with our little game. I doubt if the fellow will himself. You can let him know that you're getting even for his blow the other night."

"I dare say I could, but—well, play I'm working for wages," he said, his tones hardening, his dark eyes fairly flashing with poorly concealed passions. "Pay me my price, and I'll wipe him out, too clean."

"I don't—I hardly think I understand your meaning, Bark?"

He made a swift gesture toward Judd Varley as he added:

"What are you to him, and he to you? Is he your lover?"

A brief, amazed stare with widely-opened eyes. Then a low, amused laugh parting her red lips as she flashed a glance into the white, set countenance of the tall gambler before replying:

"If there was more time to waste, my dear fellow, I'd read you a sharp lesson on common politeness, but as it is—no, sir; Judd Varley is not a lover of mine. Judd Varley is simply a partner in this little speculation of ours. And when the boodle is fairly collared, I expect to give him the grip of good-fellowship, and never see his face again. Unless, of course, another rare chance should turn up. But—what has all this got to do with your saying yes or no to a simple question?"

"You know the answer before it crosses my lips," was the swift retort. "You know that I love you—that I want you to marry me."

Something like a scorn curled her red lips as she cried:

"And you're trying to buy my consent? Is that it, Matson?"

"Call it that if you like," with a cold doggedness which left no room for doubting the stern resolve he had taken. "Unless I can win you, all else is worse than nothing in my sight. The boodle may go—I've lost all hankering after that, since I've learned to know and love you. Give me a show—say that when all is won you will marry me—and I'll do anything and everything you can ask of me. I'll follow up this thoroughbred, as he calls himself, and put him under the daisies. I'll work night and day until you have collared the boodle for good. There's naught you can ask which I will refuse or flinch from, if—if you will pass your word that you'll become my wife when this game is fairly played out."

Queen Esther actually blushed, her dark eyes slowly sinking before his burning gaze. She dropped his hand with sudden shyness, but it seemed more because Judd Varley was quietly looking on than through anger at his presumption. And her blush grew deeper as Varley said:

"Never mind me, Queenie. If you can stand the racket—"

"How can I help myself?" with a shy, half-laughing glance into Matson's face. "All I object to is being forced into doing what—"

"You agree? You—That settles it, little woman!" with a laugh. I'll turn this Heart o' Oak toes up before another sunrise!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

A QUARREL SOUGHT AND FOUND.

BARK MATSON was in jubilant earnest when he gave that pledge to the woman whom he wanted to make his wife, but when he came to put it into execution, he found he had calculated without his host.

In vain he passed from place to place, searching every saloon and lighted building in Silver Lode, crossing and recrossing his own trail over and over, spending the entire night in hunting for the Thoroughbred Sport. Either Hart Oakes had immediately left town after parting

with the plotters, or he was lying in very close hiding.

He managed to keep his fellow-plotters posted as to his lack of success, through no fault of his own. He had his spies on the alert, with strict orders to at once bring him word in case the stranger sport should turn up during the course of the day, and, after another secret consultation with Judd Varley—natural enough, after all, since they were supposed to represent different sides of the Big Bracer question, and had to decide on a third party to assist them in administering the estate—he issued fresh instructions to his men.

They were to let it leak out, as through accident, that there "was blood on the moon," thanks to a bit of side-work which a "too fresh" pilgrim got in on the night of Gypsy Gale's flight from the rope.

"It didn't count fer so much, jest then, as we he'd bigger game in the box, ye see," confidentially explained one of his agents to a select company of citizens. "We was lookin' to cut off the Big Bracer, you want to know. An' we hit onto this durn critter, an' wanted to know what-all he was moseyin' 'round so loose in the dark. An'—waal, they was a basty puldin' right then an' thar, as you've ketched wind of, I reckon!"

"Ben Hurley got his neck broke all to pieces! An'—but you kin count up all the rest, I reckon!"

"He'll never show up, after that. And yet—counting it all in, and looking at the business square—I don't see that we can throw any very hefty blame on the fellow! I reckon he thought he was fighting for his sweet life, when Break-neck Ben tackled him!"

"Waal, you see, it ain't jest that, come to whiddle 'er to a sharp p'int, pardner," grinned the fellow, whispering hoarsely: "The critter made out to tum'le Bark Matson over—the cleanest knock-out lick I ever see! Au'—waal, don't you let on, pardner, but—keep the two eyes o' you all both open, an' ef the sport does show up in Silver Lode, bet your sweet life thar's gwine fer to be a he-ole circus!"

Thus it was that, long before noon, every man in Silver Lode was watching for a stranger sport, and confident that he would at once be notified, and that he could pick a fight with the man whom he had sworn to kill, without giving rise to suspicions which might endanger the perilous game they were playing, Bark Matson sought the sleep he sorely needed. If nothing else, he felt that he ought to be in perfect trim when he "tackled" the fellow who had so easily "knocked him out!"

It was not until pretty well along in the afternoon that word of warning reached him, but when his sound slumbers were broken, Matson cut little time to waste in getting ready for stern work.

Both Queen Esther and Judd Varley had carefully impressed upon him the strict necessity for making it a personal affair. On no account must he permit it to be suspected that Gypsy Gale's affairs had aught to do with the quarrel. And, if possible, he must hinder even Hart Oakes from thinking that his enforced allies had turned upon him.

"It will be a ticklish job, but I reckon I can carry it out," he muttered to himself as he looked at his weapons, carefully selecting the cartridges with which he filled each chamber, making sure his hidden knife was handy, and easy to snatch from its sheath. "Only for that—it would be too easy!"

The report carried to Bark Matson was true enough. Just a little past the middle of the afternoon, Hart Oakes dropped in at Fatty Wells's Alhambra: until he actually crossed the threshold, unseen or unrecognized by any of the many who were keeping a lookout for his advent.

He was still in the saloon when Bark Matson entered the door, followed by a curious little assembly, and his cool blue eyes at once fixed on the tall fellow, whose naturally dark eyes looked all the darker now for the discolored halo surrounding them.

"Hand-painted, and by a clever artist, don't you think, pardner?" he softly murmured to Fatty Wells, with whom he was lazily conversing when the party entered the saloon.

"Look out—he's on the war path, big!" hurriedly whispered the kind-hearted keeper, with a swift glance to make sure his favorite shotgun was in its accustomed position. "Evening, gents."

"How, Fatty!" yawned Matson, his discolored eyes passing coldly over the figure of the cool sport who stood at the further end of the bar, his back toward the now deserted gaming-room, his face toward the front of the saloon. "It's plain enough to see you wasn't out in the hills last night! You're blooming as a red, red rose! Give me a nail. And poison the gentlemen, if they ever indulge at this hour of the day."

"Business—couldn't do any good out there, if I wanted to, ever so bad—slip into the fu'st crack I come to, you know!" chuckled the jolly host, deftly sling glasses along the polished counter, in his haste failing to note that one of these was supplied Hart Oakes.

"I said gentlemen. Fatty!" harshly uttered

Matson, as he strode along the counter and rudely caught up the glass from before Oakes, using his left hand for the action.

The thoroughbred saw it all in an instant, but he never "turned a hair," never lost his easy, half-sleepy smile as his big blue eyes watched the tall fellow.

He saw, what all others saw: that Matson gripped the heavy glass in readiness to dash it full into his face at the ghost of an excuse; that his right hand was partly hidden from sight, but just as plainly grasping the butt of a pistol, ready to take a snap-shot instanter.

But he never changed his position in the slightest, and that was apparently the most awkward one he could have assumed when fire-arms were likely to be called into play.

His left side was touching the counter, on which his left elbow lightly rested, his fingers of that hand lazily turning a freshly-lighted cigar between his lips. His right hand rested akimbo on his hip, but his light sack coat was thrown open far enough for all to see that no weapon lay within easy reach of that hand, if, indeed, he was armed at all. Certain it is that none of those sharp eyes could detect the presence of knife or pistol.

Bark Matson took all this in at a glance, and the scowl deepened on his bruised and discolored face. There was an unwritten code of honor which even he dared not wantonly violate, and he felt that his task would be far easier had this cool sport worn his weapons in open sight. For, of course, the fellow must be armed!

"I asked gentlemen to join me, Fatty!" repeated Matson, pointing his words still more plainly, still in readiness to dash the glass into that lazily smiling face at the faintest excuse.

"That lets me out, then!" softly uttered the thoroughbred, as he felt all eyes upon him. "I've always been a scalawag—always will be, my people told me!"

"Who asked you to chip, you rascal?" snarled Matson, his face fairly livid with his fierce passions.

"That's another of their pet names!" murmured Oakes, a look of sleepy wonder coming into his big blue eyes. "Curious, how a fellow's reputation will fly ahead of him! Must be in the air!"

A faint laugh, smothered even in its birth, came from the little group beyond Matson, and this by no means lessened his hot rage. And yet—he dare not strike or shoot, without at least the shadow of justification, and all this afforded none on which he could fasten.

"That glass was 'tended fer me, Matson, ef you ain't kickin' at 'cludin' me into the list o' gents," said Fatty Wells, his chubby fingers closing on the tumbler, his little eyes staring into that dark, passionate countenance. "Ef so be you don't object, pard?"

"I thought you meant it for this egg-sucking hound, Fatty!"

"I'd give a spread-winged buzzard o' our daddies for a square pull at half a dozen!" murmured Oakes, without a line of his sleepy countenance altering. "That's why pap kicked me out o' house and home—couldn't get enough eggs together to make a glass of egg-nog! But—don't pull 'em too late, pard! Ef there's anything in this world I'm not too easy—lazy, pap used to call it!—to hate, it's eggs tha' have hung on the vines so long they've got touched by frost!"

"Bottle up, will you?" snarled Matson, seeing that he must take it upon himself to start the quarrel, whirling as if angered by such idle chatter, hurling his glass and contents full at the head of the other.

But it never reached its mark. With lightning swiftness Oakes swayed his head aside sufficient for the missile to pass harmlessly over his shoulder, then—Bark Matson went endlong back into the very midst of his "beelers," before even his ready hand could draw the gun it clasped, though the weapon exploded in his scabbard as he fell!

"Don't crowd me too close, gents!" sharply cried Oakes, leaping back to the partition, each hand gripping a cocked revolver!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HIS OWN EXECUTIONER.

JUST how was it done?

Not one of the on-lookers could have explained this to their own complete satisfaction. All they could have said with anything like certainty was that one second Bark Matson apparently held the stranger wholly at his mercy, and in the next was knocked clean off his feet by a blow that sounded through the room like the kick of a mule!

"Keep your clothes on, gentlemen!" added the thoroughbred as the spectators recovered sufficiently from their surprise to move, falling away from the prostrate fire-eater, more than one of them putting hand to weapon, either mechanically or through a wish to avenge the fallen man. "I'm not spoiling for a racket, but if I'm crowded too mighty close for free breathing, I'll—"

"Dip lightly, gents!" cried out Fatty Wells, emphasizing his words by the clatter of his

double-barrel across the counter as its grim muzzle was swept from side to side, covering in turn every individual within those four walls. "Ef they's got to be a bloody muss spilled all over my place, bet your sweet life I'm g'wine to take fu'st pick!"

Unless it was Hart Oakes, not a man present but knew Fatty Wells would unhesitatingly put his threats into execution at the first overt action, and before his speech was ended, not a hand touched a weapon, save those of the thoroughbred.

"That means you in, pardner!" nodded Fatty, sweeping his "howitzer" around in that direction, a grim smile upon his rosy countenance. "Ef it wasn't that you was a clean stranger to hyar, I'd be talkin' to ye out o' this yer' baby cannon; fer it ain't my rule to give a warnin' but the one time."

"Pap always said I didn't know enough to take a hint without it was followed up right smart by a kick," laughed the sport, promptly lowering his weapons as he glanced into those little but resolute eyes. "Warning goes, pardner! Only—if that clumsy brute has got any particular friends lying around loose, they'd better elect a guardian for him before his tongue blows his brains out. I can stand 'most anything in reason, but—if he tries to lay me out again, I'll copper him with something more lasting than a bunch of fives!"

"He was only tryin' fer to git even, durn ye!" growled one of the fellows who had been placed on guard against the return of this cool sport.

"Even for what? Because I painted his two eyes? And now I've given them a prime coat of varnish, without charging him a cent for either job! Does he want a mahogany frame in addition? If he insists—well, take his measure, and I'll go the whole hog for once in my life!"

There was a smile on his lips, and a grim jest on his tongue; but more than one of those present could read death in those big blue eyes as their owner stood at ease against the partition, awaiting the result.

A sound from the lips of Matson drew nearly every eye toward the fallen fire-eater, and all save one or two of the desperado's best men fell still further away from the center of the room, where he lay helpless for the moment, though regaining his senses.

"I don't want to run ye out, stranger," hesitated Fatty Wells, a worried look coming into his honest face. "But—you ought to see fer your own self jest how!"

"I'm too mighty lazy to run, pardner. And I reckon I'd find an ugly snag right in the channel, even if I were to try!"

"Where is he? Show him to me! I'll cut his heart out and—"

Hoarsely, viciously, savagely muttering, Bark Matson thrust aside the friends who were ministering to him, and sought to regain his feet, one hand clutching a wicked-looking knife, his blinded eyes glaring around in quest of the being whose tones had startled him from his half-stupor.

With deft rapidity Hart Oakes had his tools out, one of them covering Fatty Wells, and the other holding not only Bark Matson but all the remainder under its muzzle.

"Sorry to jump you, pardner," with a fleeting glance of apology to the astonished keeper, who was taken on the flank, and wholly by surprise, for he never even dreamed of danger from that lone quarter. "But I've only got one heart, and—Matson, have you made your will?"

Bark was clearing his eyes of the freshly flowing blood, and he caught sight of the thoroughbred just as those words passed his lips. He saw that his life hung on a hair. He knew that long before he could cross even that short space, he would go down with a bullet through his brain. And—what of Queen Esther?

"It's bloody murder—devil a less!" cried one of the crowd.

"That shows who you're backing! But the high-roller comes first. Do you yelp out bloody murder, Matson?"

"Shoot—but I'll get there, just the same!" savagely grated the other, crouching a bit as though gathering his muscles for what could not help being a death-leap.

"Gents—for the sake o—"

"It would be a monstrous pity to muss up the floor, wouldn't it?" and Oakes laughed shortly, still holding Fatty Wells helpless, so far as turning the muzzle of his "howitzer" in that direction was concerned. "And, for your sake, dear fellow, I'm willing to compromise, for you've treated me white. And you, Mr. Matson—"

"Will kill you or cash in my own self," was the cold, deathly retort, all flashy rage vanishing from his face and voice as by magic.

"But you hear this gentleman object to having his floor mussed up, don't you? He's got that right, and there's more than one way to skin a cat."

"It's your life or mine. That's all I know just now."

"Then you're not so mighty particular how, just so one of us gets there with both feet?" smiled the cool sport. "All you ask is a fair and equal chance to turn toes-up to the daisies!"

"Shoot—I'll still measure the depth of your heart, curse ye!"

"I could shoot, and not even your firmest backer could hint at wrong on my part, after what you've done to pick a row, you cur!" flashed the thoroughbred, for the first time giving a sign of anger. "I know your reasons for jumping on me. I know who set you to work. But let that pass. I'll never blow it, for I reckon we'll come to even terms after all's said and done. But you—if nothing but gore will satisfy you, I'll meet you on the level!"

"That's all I'll ask. Only—get down to work!"

"You're two-thirds blind now, Matson," coolly. "At your best, you couldn't hold a candle to me with either hot lead or cold steel."

"So much the better for you," with a cold, vicious sneer. "Or, do you want still longer odds? If so, don't be bashful."

"It would be simple murder if I gave you your way and met you with either knife or gun. You came here on purpose to kill me. You acted the brutal hound, and put yourself below the level of a gentleman by your conduct; but that play don't count."

"I'll make an offer that will test your nerve and prove whether you are a true sport, or simply a foul-mouthed bully. If you prefer signing yourself the last to accepting my offer, then I'll step outside with you and let you name your own tools, with the greatest of pleasure in life!"

"Spit it out, and spare us your brooth!"

"Good as wheat! Select your best friend to act for you. I reckon this gentleman will condescend to oblige me, seeing I'm a perfect stranger in town," with a slight nod toward Fatty Wells, at the same time lowering the pistol with which he had held that worthy in check.

"Jest so 'tain't too bloody murder," hesitated the saloon-keeper.

At a sign from Bark Matson, one of the company stepped up to the counter, while all the others watched curiously enough.

"Select a fresh deck of cards, gentlemen," coldly added the sport. "Assure yourselves that the seal has not been tampered with. Take it into one of the short-card tables in yonder," with a nod toward the vacant gaming-room. "Break the seal and shuffle the cards well. Pin the deck down with a revolver containing a single cartridge. And when this is done, Bark Matson, you and I will turn card by card, in rotation, until death turns up for one of us. Dare you accept my offer?"

There was a low buzz of wondering excitement among the listeners, but not a muscle of that bruised face altered, save to utter:

"Do your share, Johnson, and leave the rest to me."

"But—it'll be bloody murder—no less!" objected Wells.

"Isn't that what he came here for? Can't you see that he means to kill me, unless I get in my work first?" laughed Oakes, lightly. "Please oblige the crowd, and I'll deposit ducats enough to pay all damages to the place, b.sides burying the victim."

Without further objections, though plainly reluctant to have a hand in the business, Fatty Wells yielded. And a few minutes later the two principals were summoned to the fatal table, where all was arranged as directed.

In clear, cold tones Hart Oakes completed his proposition.

"Let my second take your tools, Mr. Matson, and your friend can make sure I'm without arms. We'll have no use for other tools than the one on the dock."

In perfect silence both men were disarmed. Then Oakes added:

"Select a card, if you please, sir. I want you to be your own executioner clean through the deal! Name any one, with the understanding that whichever of us turns it up, we taking turns in facing a single card from the deck, is to take this gun and blow his brains out!"

"It'll be bloody murder!" gasped Fatty Wells, brushing his brow.

"Not at all, dear fellow," laughed Oakes, his blue eyes glowing. "It will simply be suicide, and thus spare any ugly thoughts of lynching among the friends of this gentleman—by courtesy!"

"You think it's a dead sure thing, don't you?" grimly said Matson.

"I've full faith in my luck. I wouldn't be a gambler if I hadn't. Will you name your death-warrant?"

"It takes a spade to make a grave! Let it be the ace of spades!"

"Will you turn first, or shall I? I want to give you every show."

Without a word Bark Matson slipped the top-most card from the pack, and steadily faced it before him. It was a simple spot-card.

"You're not superstitious?" laughed Oakes, as he glanced at the nine-spot thus faced. "Yet that same card has been the death-warrant of many a better man in—"

"Weakening already?" sneered Matson, showing his teeth.

"What for?" with a look of mild astonishment in face and voice, as he easily faced the second card. "I couldn't beat my luck if I were to try

never so hard! You are to be your own executioner, remember!"

"If I am, it will give me a rest from that tongue, anyway!"

After that nothing more was said, each man turning a card in succession, without the slightest hesitation. Coolly, steadily, neither too slow nor too fast. And if outward semblance alone was to be taken as the test, not one of the breathless lookers-on but what felt far deeper anxiety as to the result.

The round table was drawn out into the center of the spacious room. The spectators, despite their intense interest in the curious duel between the two sports, kept at a fair distance away, though still near enough to see every card the instant it was turned face upward.

On opposite sides of the table stood Wells and Johnson, each man to the right of his principal, holding the weapons they had taken from the duelists.

Card after card was turned, until two-thirds of the deck had been faced, then—Bark Matson drew the fatal card!

With a short, hard laugh Hart Oakes pushed the pistol across the table, and Matson picked it up without a tremor. He glanced into the cylinder, and made sure the single cartridge was in a proper position, then cocked the weapon—click! click! To level it at Oakes and fire!

But his eyes betrayed him, and with a swift ducking motion the lead was evaded, the pistol wrenched from his hand and the brass-bound butt brought with terrible force full upon his bare head!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN EYE-OPENER FOR BARK MATSON.

WITHOUT a moan he fell face down across the table, while Oakes leaped to the side of Fatty Wells, snatching a revolver in each hand, facings the startled spectators with white face but unshaken tones.

"Who dares stand up for the treacherons cur? Who is foul enough to even hint that I haven't served the assassin rightly?"

"Ef they is seek a dirty boun'-pup in the crowd, I'll chaw him up my own self!" indignantly spluttered Fatty Wells, fairly scorching up with hot rage at the foul action. "Git him out o' this, you heelers o' his'n! Git him out in a holy minut, or durned ef I don't drag him out by the hind-leg fer to dump into the next mudhole! I will—so!"

Perhaps it was just as well for Hart Oakes that he found such a prompt and decided backer. Though not one present could find a word to say in Bark Matson's defense, more than one hand dropped to knife or pistol-hilt as he fell under that terrible stroke. And if the thoroughbred had been less prompt in arming himself, he would almost certainly have been struck down or shot from behind.

As it was, he regained his own tools, and while the sullen "heelers" were removing their fallen champion, the sport disappeared, no one could say just how or when.

Bark Matson was carried to the hotel and placed on a bed in a chamber which adjoined that occupied by the false heiress. A doctor was quickly brought, and after a careful examination declared that, though the skull was not fractured, it was doubtful whether he ever fully recovered from the terrible shock. He gave it as his opinion that, at the best, Matson was in for a severe spell of brain fever.

Both the false heiress and Judd Varley were absent from the hotel when this transpired, paying a visit to some of the out-lying claims contained among the property to which Queen Esther laid claim, through her relationship to the Big Bracer.

"I don't care to be in town when the rumpus comes off," frowned Varley. "We can't be too careful, you know!"

Neither of them seemed to fear failure on the part of their dupe, and this confidence made the truth fall all the more heavily upon them when, just before dusk, they returned to the hotel from their ride.

Judd Varley, after hearing the account of the row, expressed strong sympathy for his colleague, and thus covered his visit to his room. He found Matson temporarily alone, the man who agreed to pass the first part of the night with him having stolen away to eat his supper.

Queen Esther promptly admitted Varley at his signal, and softly closed the chamber door behind him as she asked:

"You've seen him? What's the show?"

"I've seen him," with a muttered curse. "He's sleeping or in a stupor. I didn't stop to learn just which. All I know is that he's alive—curse the blundering idiot!"

"Amen!" and the word fell from her lips with a short, hard, cruel laugh. "To think how the addle-pated cur took it all in! To think how he dare make love to me, right before your eyes honey!"

"I'm not thinking of that, just now, since it all took place under my eyes, as you say," bluntly returned the tall gambler. "What I'm thinking of is this: How much did the infernal botcher let drop before that cool devil? Did he betray his real purpose?"

Queen Esther suddenly grew grave as Varley uttered these words. She, too, had asked herself these questions, immediately after learning how the meeting between Bark Matson and Hart Oakes had terminated, but her solution was a little more comforting than the one which Varley evidently reached.

"I don't think we have so very much to fear on that point, honey. Bark isn't quite an ass in all things, though he has shown a mighty long pair of ears in one respect, as you know well enough. We warned him particularly on that point, and I'm inclined to believe he followed our instructions as well as his limited wits would permit."

"If you knew him to be such a fool, why did you run him out as a champion?" harshly muttered the tall gambler.

"Because I didn't know of any one who could fill the bill better than he," was the prompt retort. "He had a lovely pair of eyes that gave him ample excuse for salivating the sport. I knew he would face Sheel itself at my slightest bidding—poor fool!"

Once again her light, mocking laugh rung out clearly, and sent bitter shame and agony to the brain and heart of the miserable wretch whom she was mocking, after he had so nearly lost his life while trying to do her bidding!

For, even as Judd Varley left the chamber in which Bark Matson lay in a half-stupor, half-sleep, the bloodshot eyes faintly opened. And then the sound of the woman whom he so fiercely, madly, loved, coming to his ears through the thin partition which alone separated the two rooms, drove the mists from his hotly-throbbing brain.

Not a word escaped his painfully-strained ears. Not a laugh, not a jeer, not a slighting word escaped him, after that first terrible shock.

He even strove to rise from his bed, to gain a weapon with which to wipe out his shameful humiliation. But his powers were not quite equal to that. And though he longed to shout out his thirst for vengeance, he choked it back until—

"Wait—wait until—until I can look into her false eyes!" he grated between his clinched teeth, then fairly held his breath to catch everything.

"I wish I could be as sure as you try to make out," gloomily muttered Varley, biting the ends of his mustache as he stared at the uncarpeted floor at his feet as he sat on the side of the bed.

"Some of the boys ought to be able to solve your doubts."

"I've heard what they can tell. They agree that nothing about us or Gypsy Gale came to the surface. But what passed below it? Who can say what that devilish cool rascal was thinking of?"

"What matter? As long as he don't act, a sig for his thinking! If that clumsy fool made a botch of it—you don't reckon there's any chance of his hearing us, Varley?" with sudden fear in her lowered tones.

Himself startled, Judd Varley cautiously passed out to the other chamber, opening the door and speaking softly to the occupant. No reply. Bark Matson lay just as he had seen him a few minutes earlier, heavily breathing, seemingly still unconscious. Varley entered and shook him by the arm, at first lightly, then with considerable force. But only a feeble moan answered his last effort, and fully satisfied that there was no danger to be feared through their unguarded conversation, he returned to report as much to his confederate.

"Then that's all right," laughed Queen Esther. "Just think! If he only knew how beautifully we played him for a sucker! If he only knew that he was asking your wife, Judd Varley, to marry him. And right before your very face, too."

"The impudent cur was never nearer his death than he was that moment, little girl," with a frown mingling with his laugh. "Only that I needed his services, I'd have perforated him right there."

"Let him went, honey," with another laugh, that seemed to tear the heart of the man she ridiculed to ribbons as he listened. "He's slipped up on it, and of course I've got a fair excuse for shaking him, when the boodle is fairly ours. Until then—well, I reckon we can make him pay for his keep."

"I don't know but what we might as well shake him right now, little woman," slowly uttered Varley in response. "Even if he ever gets on his feet again, he'll never have the nerve to tackle Oakes. And then—I've got another string to my bow, remember!"

"You don't mean—"

"Just that," with a hard, mocking laugh. "Anybody can set a fool like Matson at the throat of a man whom he already hates enough to murder, but it takes an artist to get work out of one who—you know that dirty buck I was talking with up near Cap-sheaf?"

"I saw him. You think you can contrive it?"

"I don't think; I simply know it. You should have seen how I soft-soaped the insect-y varmint," laughing softly at the memory.

"Whisky John, or John Whisky, as he called himself, and I must admit that he smelled true to his name, too. But that don't count.

"He was one of the Big Bracer's best backers, Injun though he is. I never saw a man worse cut up over anything than John Whisky, and for a little bit I had hard work to keep his claws from my throat. If it hadn't been for my bringing forward my repentance—my championing you as the daughter of his old friend—I really believe I'd have had to rub him out! As it is—"

"You're going to set him after this rascally sport?"

"I am, for a fact. And this very night, if we can find out where the slippery cuss makes his nest. John is on the watch even now."

"Well, one thing is sure: he can't prove himself a bigger fool than my adorable-never-to-be-thought-he-thinks-he-will bridegroom!" the woman laughed derisively, as she left the chamber with Varley.

And Bark Matson?

He lay on his couch, bitterly vowed vengeance on them both.

CHAPTER XXXV.

NOW JOHN WHISKY EARNED HIS WAGES.

BUT the two arch plotters were fated to be held in suspense yet a little longer, and before midnight Judd Varley was waited upon by the half-drunken Ute, "John Whisky," who declared that the Thoroughbred Sport was nowhere to be found inside Silver Lode.

"If he's hiding, it bodes us no good, be sure of that!" the tall gambler muttered with an ugly, uncanny scowl as he parted with Queen Esther at her door, after another consultation.

The false heiress shivered slightly, though the air was warm enough, one would have thought.

Though Judd Varley had kept pretty close to the hotel since his return with "Miss Tempest" from their trip of inspection, his henchmen had contrived to convey to him a pretty accurate idea of how matters were progressing in town. And almost without exception they declared that Hart Oakes, by his sharp contest with Bark Matson, had won fully half of Silver Lode, so far as sympathy went.

"Let him lick another blind man, an' he kin tote all Silver Lode in his britches pocket!" declared Grizzly, in utter disgust. "Durn an' double-durn sech a ornary camp—that's me, honey!"

Why, then, was the sport keeping so shady? Why, unless he suspected them of setting Bark Matson at his throat? And if this was the case, would he give over the game so readily? Wouldn't he strike back, at one or both of them?

Judd Varley wrestled with such thoughts as these, pretty well all that night, and hence it is not so strange that his right hand instantly sought a weapon as, after an early breakfast the next morning, he came face to face with Hart Oakes himself, just outside the hotel door.

"Flag o' truce, you know, pardner," softly uttered the thoroughbred, as he smilingly met that startled glance. "I'm giving you time to make up your minds. I'll call on you and—Miss Tempest—at your own hour to-morrow morning. Until then—be good to yourself, Varley!"

Without waiting for a reply, Oakes passed the tall gambler by, entering the hotel and making arrangements for board and lodging.

Judd Varley, after a brief hesitation, kept on his course, seeing that horses were prepared for another trip through the mines in company with Miss Tempest. But when he returned to the office, finding the thoroughbred gone, he contrived to glean a bit of information which set his gray eyes aflame with evil delight.

"We've got him foul, unless he lays out again to-night, Queenie!" he whispered in her ear as Miss Tempest met him, ready for the jaunt.

As before, they spent the greater portion of the day out of doors, and as before Judd Varley met and conversed very earnestly with John Whisky, who reached the town several hours before the equestrians.

It seemed a harvest day for the liquor-loving Ute. His blind, unreasoning devotion to Gypsy Gale had long been known throughout Silver Lode, and many were the surmises and even wagers made as to his real intentions, a few holding that he would try to "get even" with those who had been most forward in hunting the Big Bracer to death, while the large majority declared that, given plenty of his beloved firewater, John would never lift a finger against the worst among them.

And so, hoping to learn definitely how the grim red-skin really felt, whisky was free as water to him that day. And as his tongue grew looser, the doubts were quickly settled. There would be no "racket" as far as John Whisky was concerned, unless justice was denied the fair daughter of his old friend.

"Den—heap dam row, you bet!" with a drunken scowl.

And John Whisky, reeling, swaying, high-stepping, his ragged blanket trailing far behind his heels, met Judd Varley and Miss Tempest just as they entered Silver Lode. To the

few who saw them, he seemed bowing his drunken allegiance to Big Bracer's heiress. In reality he was saying;

"When dark come, John ready. John—you—John's boss; dat big plenty 'scoop' im in, too dam quick!"

There was an evil glow of pleasure in the gray eyes of the tall gambler as he listened, yet the tidings received appeared to have a bad effect upon him, beginning to show itself almost as soon as he reached the hotel. He had a racking headache. The hot sun must have brought it on. He would try and sleep it off, for there was work ahead.

"Unless Matson begins to pick up pretty soon, we'll really have to find another man to fill his place. Miss Tempest is very anxious to get down to solid business. Says she can't sleep until everything is straightened out, and the last claim against the estate paid off."

This in the hotel bar, and with a parting "night-cap" Varley retired to his chamber, not even dallying for a call on poor Matson.

To all appearance he had retired for good, but that was only in seeming. As soon as he dared, he stole over to the chamber occupied by his wife, and together they kept watch until they both heard and saw Hart Oakes retire to his room, in the rear of the second story.

Sitting in the dark, whispering softly, they waited nearly another hour. Then Queen Esther stole on silent tip-toe to the door through which the thoroughbred had vanished, holding her breath as she bent an ear to the key-hole.

Barely perceptible to even her sharp senses, but firm, regular, and unbroken by other sounds, came the sound of breathing. Beyond a doubt their intended victim was already lost in slumber.

"Make sure work of it this time, honey!" the woman muttered as she returned with her report. "He's safer dead than living and on our side!"

"John Whisky thinks that way, little woman," laughed Varley, as his lips answered hers in another fashion. "Prepare to shed your tears, for you'll never look on Hart Oakes again!"

Silently, as though his feet were shod with velvet, Judd Varley stole down the stairs and out through the narrow door leading to the flight of stairs, only pausing to assure himself that no person was near enough to recognize, even if they should catch a glimpse of his figure. And five minutes later he was hurriedly whispering to John Whisky, pointing up at a window in the rear side of the hotel.

"He's in there, sleeping soundly. You know what to do?"

The Ute nodded quickly.

"John climb in. Mek him more sleepy, if kin. If kick up row, eh?"

In one hand he held a dirty bottle of liquid. In the other he flashed out a long scalping-knife, his little eyes seeming to flash fire as they glittered before the face of the tall gambler.

"Alive if you can—dead if you must!" he grated, viciously, adding in calmer tones: "The child of your old friend did not forget. She fixed the window all right, and—see!"

He crept close to the rear of the building, running his hand over the rough boarding until it found what he sought: a small but strong cord, stretched up to the window of the chamber occupied by Hart Oakes.

"Tie your lariat to thi', then pull on one side. It will haul the rope up over a hook stout enough to bear up a mule—so!"

John Whisky seemed to accept everything as perfectly correct, and with knife clinched between his teeth, he silently drew himself up the doubled rope, breathlessly watched by Judd Varley.

"If he only makes the rifle!" the tall gambler breathed barely loud enough for his own ears to catch, as he crouched down under cover of some rocks and weeds a few yards away. "If not—if the cursed sport kicks up a row—kill or be killed, John!" with vicious emphasis as he cocked his revolver. "I'd hate to down you myself, but you mustn't talk! We can't afford that, you know!"

Even then Judd Varley could not hide his treacherous nature. Even while he felt his tool was doing his work as best he knew how, there was death in his busy brain. Even if he had to shoot the Indian, his lips must never be given a chance to explain his failure to others!

He saw John Whisky open the window, secure it thus, then steal silently into the room. In almost suffocating suspense he waited and watched, growing relieved as minute after minute passed without an alarm or even the muffled sounds which would denote a struggle. Surely the boasted drug of the red-skin was doing its work! Surely John—

A dusky figure thrust its head out of the window and made a quick gesture which sent the hot blood thrilling through the veins of the tall gambler.

"He's caught the turn, first clatter!" he laughed softly, his eyes fairly ablaze with diabolical joy and triumph. "Good-by, Mr. Thoroughbred! A quick and safe passage across the divide!"

Another gesture hurried his movements.

Catching hold of the rope Judd Varley quickly reached the window where John Whisky awaited him.

"Got him, sure! Fas' 'sleep—you see? Now—git him 'way—ride on John's hoss—eh?"

"Good boy!" muttered Varley in the same guarded tones as he slipped inside the room.

Two minutes later John Whisky slid down the rope, to catch a bound and blanketed figure as it came sliding feet foremost through the window, steadied by strong hands above. And then, bending under the burden, the red-skin stole through the night to where his horse was hidden, his progress watched for a few moments before the tell-tale hook was removed and the window gently lowered to its ordinary position.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AN IRREPRESSIBLE SPORT.

ALL this time the false heiress was listening for sounds which she most earnestly hoped would never come to her ears. The hours seemed endless, and despite her intense anxiety, she was almost falling into a doze when on her chamber door came the gentle signal by which Judd Varley was wont to make known his wish for an interview. She leaped from bed and grasped the key to turn it, when a guarded whisper came through the key-hole in the voice of her husband:

"All right—sleep hearty! He's gone, for good and all!"

A breath of relief broke from her lungs, and as she heard cautious footsteps retreating, she returned to bed—and to sleep!

The death of no single enemy could long hold her eyes open.

As it was agreed upon that Judd Varley, the better to escape suspicion should any row arise over the strange vanishment of the sport, should keep his bed until late, "with a headache," the false heiress was nothing surprised to miss his face at the breakfast table. Nor did she see aught of Hart Oakes. And there was a smile in her eyes as she returned to her chamber, pausing to tap gently on the closed door of the room occupied by Judd Varley, as a sign that he might arise.

She felt a little surprise that the tall gambler delayed his morning call so long, and finally descended to "the parlor," sending word to the host that she wished to consult with Mr. Varley about selecting another administrator to the estate, in place of Bark Matson.

Mine host promised to send in Varley, but he must have had no little trouble in finding him, judging by his delay. And when he did return, his face was flushed and troubled as he stammered:

"Sorry, miss, but I reckon he's slipped me! He ain't in the house, nur I hain't see'd him this mornin'. Most like he's gone out fer a walk or a ride or—"

"Send a messenger to hunt him up, then, please!"

It was all she could think of to say, just then. And she was anxious to get rid of the landlord, lest the awful doubts which filled her chilling heart should betray themselves in her slowly blanching face.

What did it mean? What had gone wrong? What fresh complications had arisen since Varley assured her of complete success, last night?

Slowly the woman went back to her chamber.

In those next few hours, the woman suffered something of retribution for her many sins. For she loved Judd Varley as only such women can love; with a wild, unreasoning, pantherish passion!

Noon, and nothing of Judd Varley!

She sent out word for search to be made by men whom she knew she could trust implicitly. She ordered a horse, and with a couple of true rascals as guards, she dashed over the broken country, searching the spots which she had ridden over in his company during the past two days. Only to return to the hotel at dusk, unnoticed the strange excitement which seemed to fill the entire town, heading not the many peculiar looks which greeted her as she passed, to enter the hotel and ask if aught had been heard from Judd Varley.

Not a word! No one had seen him! And stunned, with unsteady steps, the false heiress sought the seclusion of her chamber. To utter a glad cry that seemed to tear her heart asunder as she sprung to open the door, on the panel of which sounded that familiar signal!

"Varley—where have you been all this time?" she cried, her voice choked and betraying something of which she had suffered, as she flung open the door—to be caught in strong hands and gently, yet firmly forced back to the bed.

By Hart Oakes, alive and grimly smiling at her speechless horror!

He swung the door to behind him, and stood before the trembling, horrified woman, speaking calmly, steadily, without a trace of sympathy in his mellow voice:

"You are a woman, after all, Queen Varley. Though your crimes richly merit death by the rope, I can't forget that you belong to the same sex as the good mother who bore me. Only for that—"

"You have murdered him—my husband!"

gasped the woman, her tones barely articulate, her face full of mingled despair, grief and almost savage hatred as she glared into his face with her black eyes.

"You are wrong. Judd Varley is still living. He has not been harmed in the slightest, though I'll not say how long he will remain in an equally sound condition."

"Where is he? Let me go to him! You devil!" with vicious rage as she flashed forth a slender blade, striking savagely at his breast.

Only to have her wrist caught and the weapon twisted from her grasp. And then, with one arm flung around her, one hand firmly covering her lips, foiling her desperate struggles to escape or cry aloud:

"You're no natural fool, Mrs. Varley. You're smart enough to know when you're beaten. And beaten you are now, at every point in the bold and cruel game you and yours have been trying to play on Silver Lode.

"I've taken all this trouble to give you a chance for your life. I've kept back the worst of your misdeeds, because I don't want a woman to feel the lash or the rope—and if the whole truth leaks out before you can levant from Silver Lode, one or the other of these dooms will surely overtake you!

"Do you comprehend? Can you understand what I say? Will you act half-way sensible if I take away my hand and arm? If so, close your eyes twice—that settles it, my dear!" with a sudden return of his old careless grace as he released Queen Esther and drew back a pace.

He struck a match and lit the lamp which stood on the washstand. This was quickly done, but when he turned again to the woman, she was outwardly cold and calm, though her ghastly pale face looked aged a full half-score years since his entrance.

"I admit nothing, you cunning demon. I deny everything. But—you can swear that Judd Varley is still living?"

"Just as surely as that I'm answering you this moment, ma'am."

"Then how—who—"

"John Whisky, to be sure, ma'am," with a broad smile that lighted up his entire countenance as he readily divined what she would ask had her parched throat not hindered her speech. "You thought John had the wool pulled over his eyes and a ring in his nose, didn't you? That is right where you made one of your big mistakes. John isn't built that way. John can't brag much on complexion or fine feathers, but John has a heart big as all outdoors, and so pure white, snow would sell for frozen lambblack alongside it."

Her lips parted, but only a hoarse, indistinct sound escaped them.

"But that wasn't the worst, for your side of the house, my dear," mercilessly added the sport, smothering whatever sympathy her speechless agony might have inspired by recalling that frightful crime on Satan's Ladder. "You should have talked in whispers when you had Bark Matson for a next-door neighbor, for—"

"Curse him!" gasped the wretched woman, growing more ghastly than ever. "He's sold us out."

"He heard every word you and Judd Varley uttered in here the night after he was hurt. He heard you ridicule him from crown to sole. And when he saw how completely you had played him for a sucker—when he knew that you were Judd Varley's wife all the while you were promising to marry him to pay for my murder—well, I reckon it made him red-hot to even up matters with you both."

"He has given away the whole snap, concealing nothing of consequence. He has promised to make full and open confession to the assembled citizens of Silver Lode this very evening. The crowd is gathering even now, Mrs. Varley," his tones suddenly growing graver, and even a touch of pity coming into both his eyes and his voice as he added: "I wish to give you a chance to save yourself, if you are wise enough to accept it at my hands. If you are found when all is told; if you are within reach when the true story of that horrible affair of the stage on Satan's Ladder is given the crowd; and when they hear how Todd Undermill came by his death—they'll forget that you are a woman, and no one nor one hundred men like me can save you from their anger."

"My husband—what of him?" Queen Esther asked, her face hardening, her tones suddenly growing steady and hard as she gazed squarely into his face, determined to read the truth there in case his lips should strive to deceive her.

"He's in the hands of justice," was the cold response. "I could not save him if I would—I would not if I could. As for you, there is no time to lose. I have a horse waiting for you back of the hotel! You can slip out of the window, in my chamber. Ride for your life, if you are a wise woman. Half an hour from now will be forever too late."

"If I go—I'll live to avenge my husband—on you, demon!"

"That's all right!" with a short laugh, as he turned toward the door. "I reckon you'll get over such notions in time. If not—well, maybe my old luck will pull me through even that trial. Now—go, I warn you for the last time.

If you refuse—if you show up before the crowd down yonder—good-by Queen Esther!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ALL FOR REVENGE.

If secretly, the Thoroughbred Sport had none the less been effectively at work ever since he witnessed the pretended rescue from the wreck over Satan's Elbow, and though few in Silver Lode realized how much he had accomplished, or how very busy he had been in unearthing the truth and preparing for the finale, the mass promptly followed the lead of those few in cheering the handsome sport as he stepped into the ruddy glow of the two big bonfires which roared and crackled in front of the hotel that pleasant evening.

Hart Oakes smiled brightly as he stood gazing over the assembly until the cheering died away.

"Gentlemen—friends—men of Silver Lode!" he began, his face growing grave, his tones a peculiar mixture of the glad and the serious. "I have requested your ears for a little while this evening, not because I'm at all lacking in that direction, but to tell you a strange story, founded on truth, and closely concerning certain persons who have graced or disgraced your lively little town by forming part of its population.

"You don't need to be told that one of these characters is—or was, perhaps I had ought to say—Stuart Tempest, better known among you as Gypsy Gale, the Big Bracer."

"Ef you could fetch him forward to speak fer himself!" cried a sulky voice from the crowd, "I'd furnish the rope fer to make his neck look slick—an' never charge a red cent!"

"I'm sorry for you, pardner," laughed Oakes, easily. "Because, if you have a single grain of honesty or decency left in your composition, you'll beg your nearest neighbors to kick you from here to sheol and back again when you learn the simple facts about the Big Bracer! But that don't count! I'm here to explain, not reprove.

"Some of you were honest enough in your belief that Gypsy Gale had forfeited his claims on life. Many of you felt that he richly deserved lynching, and probably I should have been just as eager to help him out of the world, by the direct line, as the worst among you, if I had been granted no better light. And yet, I swear to you by the soul of my dead mother! that Gypsy Gale was bounded to his doom by the demons in human shape on whose heads all those crimes should rightfully be branded! I swear this—and I mean to prove it to the complete satisfaction of the most incredulous man now within reach of my voice!"

As the words passed his lips, the thoroughbred turned and lifted his right hand. In prompt response to this signal, a little squad of armed men pushed through the hotel door, standing on the low platform which ran along the front of the building, guarding a bound man whose face, pale as that of a corpse, and looking ghastly indeed under that ruddy glow, was instantly recognized by nearly every pair of eyes.

"It's all a put up job!" cried a harsh voice from the crowd. "Who don't know Judd Varley is clean white an' jest as squar' as they ever make 'em? Who'll stand by an' see him double-banked like this?"

Hart Oakes lifted a finger, and the angry speaker was instantly grasped and held impotent by those nearest him.

"Don't hurt the fellow, gentlemen," cried the thoroughbred, with a touch of respect in his tones. "If he is 'way off, he's honest enough to face his cards; and there's plenty others right here who are trying to hide the same hands up their sleeves, waiting to see which way the cat is going to jump before discarding or standing pat!"

"As for Judd Varley, he's reached the end of his rope, and if I don't fit the noose tightly about his throat, then you can take me out and practice on my neck until you grow weary of the sport!"

"I charge Judd Varley with plotting the ruin, disgrace and death of Stuart Tempest. I charge him with bringing about the death of your late citizen, Todd Undermill! I accuse him of sending men to hold the stage, the other day, and of maliciously causing the team to run away down Satan's Ladder, for the express purpose of killing Miss Olive Tempest, the only child and sole heiress of the Big Bracer!"

"But he saved her life, at the risk of his own, man!" cried one thoroughly bewildered citizen.

"That's what a good many honest citizens believe, but I'm going to show you how easy it is for a smart pair of hands to fool even the sharpest pair of eyes," laughed Oakes, as he made another signal, which, like the former one, was promptly obeyed.

Leaning on a strong arm, Bark Matson came out of the hotel and was assisted upon the little platform where Hart Oakes made his address.

"You know this man, so I hardly need introduce him, gentlemen, the thoroughbred said, in cold, grave tones. "He will tell you a plain tale of a diabolical plot, in which he has figured more or less prominently."

"All I ask is grace enough to clear my breast of the whole vile plot, gentlemen," coldly uttered Matson, ghastly pale, too weak to stand unsup-

ported, but with grim resolution in face and tones as he added: "So far as I know, every word uttered by Mr. Oakes is gospel truth! If anything, he has been too mild in his charges."

"It was all based on a desire to strip Gypsy Gale of his boddle. Judd Varley first proposed the scheme, and talked it over with me. I jumped at the chance, for I wanted money, the worst way! And then Varley brought in another actor. You've all seen her. You've all known her as Miss Olive Tempest, the daughter of the Big Bracer!"

A murmur ran through the gathering, half threatening, half wonder.

"You think I am lying, but every word I utter can and shall be amply backed up in the end! I declare that Judd Varley brought this woman forward, and through her devilish charms fastened me to his side so firmly that I would have dipped my hands to the elbows in human blood at his bidding! And she—she swore that when all was finished, when the boddle was fairly won—she would marry me! And—all the time she was the lawful wife of Judd Varley!"

"An' you're trying to hang him to pay fer her shakin' you!"

"I'm knotting the noose about my own neck, as well!" undauntedly. "I'm telling the simple truth. I'm confessing my own mad folly, simply to show how my partners in crime have merited exposure!"

"I swear that I helped draw Todd Undermill into the game he played with Gypsy Gale, when he lost the Cap-sheaf. I swear that Judd Varley and I promised the old man to help him skin the Big Bracer. I was to watch my chance and slip Undermill a cold deck at the right moment, and he was to bet everything on that single hand. I did what I agreed to. I gave him the cards, and Gypsy Gale never dropped to it; or he would never have backed his hand so heavily. I turned the trick, but it was a 'double cross,' and we fixed it for Undermill to lose!"

"It stupefied him, as you know. We made him believe he handled the deck so clumsily that he shifted hands on himself. And then—I make oath, as a man who expects to suffer death before another sun! I swear that, the more surely to get Gypsy Gale out of the way, Judd Varley hired Ginger Gore to kill Undermill! I swear that Judd Varley forged the note which was found on the table beside the shattered skull of the pretended suicide!"

The smothered excitement now broke forth in earnest, and only for the prompt action of Hart Oakes and a few of the "solid citizens" whom he had won over to his side, the speaker would surely have been crushed down and trampled to death by the enraged gathering.

By the order of Hart Oakes, Bark Matson as briefly as possible told the rest of the atrocious plot for a fortune.

He told how Judd Varley forged a letter to Olive Tempest, bidding her at once hasten to Silver Lode. How he intercepted the answer, but which, through an accident, fell into the hands of Gypsy Gale, thus prematurely giving him warning. He explained how the stage trail was guarded by a select gang under charge of Mrs. Varley and himself. How Grizzly was sent on to wait and watch for their intended victim, and how, at last, he gave the agreed-upon signal which told their spy in the tree-top that their prey was aboard. And then, in cold, mechanical tones he confessed just how that seeming runaway was brought about.

Without the slightest effort to save himself, he told how he secured the door to the stage, and how he gave the signal which told his men to place the needle-stuffed cushions underneath the tail of each horse, thus spurring them to madness and death!

He told how Queen Esther was lowered over the rocks, and the signal given Judd Varley, who was out in pretense of searching for the body of the Big Bracer. He fully exposed that pretended rescue, omitting nothing which could throw light on the seemingly impossible im-position.

There was a frightful interest attached to this confession, and even Hart Oakes, thoroughly as he was behind the scenes, watched the pale speaker as though fascinated. And as it was with him, so with all that crowd; so with the three men who acted as guard over Judd Varley.

And thus it was that, unseen, unsuspected by any one save her husband, Esther Varley, disguised in the masculine suit which she wore when playing the road-agent chief, was enabled to steal silently upon the porch and to cut the bonds which held the arch plotter's hands behind his back. She was even able to drop a whisper of instruction in his eager ear as she left the deadly weapon in his hand!

And still unseen, or, if seen, unheeded, the desperate woman stole off the porch to leap into the saddle of the horse provided by Hart Oakes, and cautiously edge her way to the end of the platform. Then—

Swift as thought, Judd Varley swung his armed hand around, driving the cruel blade deep into the side of the man who held his right shoulder in a careless grip, sending him reeling off the porch with a shriek of agony! Again—and the criminal was free to flee, his right hand dripping blood from two bodies!

One swift leap—a catlike bound—and he was safely seated behind his wife, who urged her good steed to instant flight, her pistol spitting forth a stream of fire and lead!

It was all so sudden, so totally unexpected, that even the Thoroughbred Sport was taken by surprise, and could only stand staring at the fleeing couple, unable to divine who or what they were.

The crowd scattered with wild cries of alarm and confusion as the spur-maddened steed plunged into their ranks.

But then a shrill, ear-splitting yell broke through that confusion, and John Whisky leaped to the ground from the front of his little blanket-covered cart which he was just driving toward the hotel. His rifle spoke promptly, and with a shriek of almost human agony, the fleeing horse fell headlong, with a shattered leg, hurling its unprepared riders far over its head!

"My love—my darling!" shrieked Queen Esther, gathering herself up and springing to where Judd Varley lay, with head doubled under him.

She rolled him over—saw the awful truth—and fell across his body, with right hand gripping the haft of her knife.

Its blade was hidden from sight, deep in her own bosom.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SPORT'S BEST TRUMP.

IN the mad rush which followed the avenging shot of John Whisky the platform was crushed down, and Bark Matson fell with it. He never rose again of his own accord. Whose hand cut his life-cord only the owner of that avenging hand knew, and he took care to keep his secret.

When Hart Oakes reached the spot where the devoted wife had fallen across the corpse of her husband and partner in crime he was too late to do more than sternly warn back the crowd. Pistol in hand he held them in check until the dead bodies were picked up and borne, under his directions, back to the hotel.

His carefully planned denouement was perfectly postponed, but long before day dawned over Silver Lode, something of the marvelous truth got wind, and only an armed guard kept the half-wild crowd from literally overflowing the hotel in their intense eagerness to learn the whole truth.

"If you must, you must, I suppose," laughed the thoroughbred, as he at length stepped out upon the porch, still lighted up by a ruddy glow as the replenished fires leaped and crackled and roared. "I'm feeling mighty cross, though, over the fiasco. I counted on being set up on the highest pinnacle in all Silver Lode as a little tin joss on wheels, for my marvelous transformation scene—for my unexampled skill in bringing the dead back to life."

"Durn the clatter!" howled an impatient auditor. "What we want to know fu'st off is whether Big Bracer is really alive, as some say."

With a light laugh Hart Oakes turned his head and called out:

"Needs must when the—call it voter, to be polite! Mr. Tempest, can you materialize, to oblige the populace?"

After a brief delay, during which the eager, wondering, bewildered citizens fairly held their breath and almost pressed their eyeballs out of their sockets in their desire to catch the first glimpse of the being summoned, a tall, athletic figure slowly stepped out of the hotel into the red glow of the bonfires, leaning on the arm of a slender, girlish companion.

One moment of stupid amaze, then the men of Silver Lode recognized that well-known face and figure; the one thin and deep-lined, the other bowed as through long and severe illness.

Hart Oakes lifted his hand to command silence, and the swift obedience showed how completely he had won over Silver Lode during the last few hours.

"You see, gentlemen," he said, gravely. "Mr. Tempest—never more to be dubbed the Big Bracer, save by those who want to climb all over my back!—Mr. Tempest yields to your natural desires, but through my lips he begs you to excuse him from making even a little bit of a speech, for he is still very weak from his wounds, and all he has gone through with of late. And he begs me to add that when his daughter, on whose arm he is now leaning, grows more composed, she will be pleased to express her thanks for this very generous reception."

A roaring chorus of cheers rent the air, under cover of which both Gypsy Gale and Olive Tempest retreated inside. Hart Oakes laughing-barred the way behind them, sacrificing his own remarkable modesty in the resolve to keep them from further exertion.

"But I say!" blurted out one nearly breathless citizen, when he could no longer join in swelling that chorus of cheers. "Ain't you gwine fer to let us know how in thunder an' lightnin' an' blue blazes an' all the rest? How you fetched it all about?"

Hart Oakes suddenly grew grave, lifting his hat as he uttered:

"Through the grace of God!"

Instantly the tumult was stilled. Not a head in all that gathering remained covered.

But this did not last long. Their curiosity was far too intense to be stilled by even such a solemn announcement, and Hart Oakes felt that his shortest, if not only course, was to make free confession.

To John Whisky belonged the credit of rescuing Gypsy Gale from what seemed certain death. He was out spearing fish by torch-light, on the shallows just above the bridge, when he was startled by seeing a seemingly dead body floating with the rapid current. He reached it, to recognize the man whom he owed a life. He saw that life still lingered, and hastened to carry the unconscious man to his little cart, only a few rods away. In this he conveyed him to his hut, far below Silver Lode, and succeeded in restoring his senses.

Gale told him how his enemies were hounding him to death, and John and Molly Whisky vowed to save his life, though it should cost their own. How well they kept their pledge, the presence of the giant proved.

Then Oakes explained how Olive Tempest escaped death by being hurled with the coach over Satan's Elbow.

It will be remembered that the thoroughbred was making his way over the rocks to the stage-trail when he discovered the runaway team coming down the steep slope. He saw Olive Tempest trying to open the fastened door, and the truth flashed upon his brain like magic.

He leaped to the rock which overhung the trail, and dropped on top of the stage. He leaned over and caught the terrified girl by the arms, dragging her out through the window, just in time to catch hold of a bough which swayed above the trail. Only with one hand, for the now senseless maiden hung limply over the other; but it was enough to break their fall on the rocky road.

He was unhurt, but he feared the worst, knowing as he did how evilly the poor girl was being schemed against. Instinct warned him of near peril, and he hastily climbed up from the trail with his lifeless burden, just in time to sink down behind the rocks when Queen Esther and Bark Matson came in sight at the head of the Ladder.

From this covert he witnessed the strange and audacious manner in which the plotters "manufactured an heiress," and after their departure, he set out to find a secure hiding-place for the girl. To soon after encounter John Whisky, who had learned from Gypsy Gale what peril threatened his child.

Together they bore Olive to Johns cabin, where father and daughter were reunited. And there they lay in safety until all was in readiness for exposing the evil plots of their enemies.

Oakes also explained how nobly John Whisky had played the part assigned him; how he warned Oakes of his peril, and how they schemed to take Judd Varley in his own trap. He told how John lured Varley into the chamber, where they quickly and noiselessly overpowered him, wrapping him in a blanket and lowering him through the window, to be hidden until his presence was required. And he told how he lulled the woman plotter, by stealing the voice of her husband, that night.

All this and much more, Hart Oakes was forced to explain before the interested gathering would permit him to retire. But enough has been said to enlighten the patient reader on all essential points.

Ginger Gore, the actual murderer of his old "pard," Todd Undermill, was the only one of the darkest criminals who was ever brought to the bar of justice. He sullenly denied his guilt, but though all his immediate accomplices were dead, there was enough evidence to convict him, and he was duly hung.

Hart Oakes spoke true when he said that Stuart Tempest had been called "the Big Bracer" for the last time in Silver Lode. The citizens did all they could to make amends for their unfounded suspicions, but the giant refugee had sickened of the place.

With Hart Oakes as an able assistant, he straightened out his affairs, and within the year sold all his property in and about Silver Lode. This, even at a slight sacrifice, gave him a vast fortune.

And long before all this was accomplished, Hart Oakes confessed his love for Olive Tempest. And she made his heart glad by admitting that his love was honesty, fully reciprocated. But she added:

"Dearly as I love you, Hart, and terrible as it would grieve me to give you up, I have sworn by the memory of my sainted mother, to never wed a man who gambles! It is for you to choose, darling! Give up cards, or give up me!"

Need I say which the Thoroughbred Sport selected?

And, best of all, the happy couple declared, was the bridal gift which Stuart Tempest gave them on their wedding eve.

It was a signed pledge to never touch a playing card while he lived; to never make a bet or wager of any sort from that hour on!

THE END.

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